Cheese

A Global History

Andrew Dalby

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CHEESE

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Cheese

A Global History

Andrew Dalby

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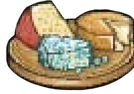
I
The Cheeseboard



Like a rock that will weather many storms, Parmesan presides over the cheeseboard. It was already famous around 1370 – and it was already what it is today, a hard, aged cow's-milk cheese – when Giovanni Boccaccio in his *Decameron*, for the sake of a good story, invented 'a mountain made of grated *parmigiano* cheese, with people living on it who never did anything but make macaroni and ravioli and cook them in capon broth'. How much earlier its history may go is unknown. A hundred years after Boccaccio, in 1475, Platina's gastronomic handbook *De honesta voluptate et valetudine* counted *parmensis* (its Latin name) as one of the two princely cheeses of Italy. His contemporaries were less certain what to call their favourite hard cheese. The Parmesan style was widespread in the Po valley; some liked the version made at Piacenza, others preferred Lodi, others again gave the credit to Milan. Finally Parma prevailed. By 1519 Parmesan cheese was a cultural cliché in England, mentioned nonchalantly in a school Latin textbook: 'Ye shall eate parmeson chese!' No wonder, because just a few years earlier Pope Julius II had made a present of a hundred Parmesan cheeses to Henry VIII.[1] That was indeed a royal gift. In 1666, when Samuel Pepys and his neighbour saw the Fire of London approaching, they wisely

Above, left to right: Manchego, Cheddar, Parmigiano Reggiano, Reblochon, Mozzarella di bufala, Stilton, Mont d'Or;
below, left to right: Gruyère, Laguiole, Brie de Meaux, Roquefort, Gorgonzola. Photographed at La Fromagerie, North London.

Mont d'Or

dug a hole to conceal their most valuable possessions, 'and put our wine in it, and I my parmazan cheese as well as my wine'. By that time hefty cylindrical Parmesan cheeses were a staple of international gastronomy, an ingredient in international cuisine. They still are. While many people only ever grate Parmesan, Italians know how good it is to eat in chunks – so hard that it is almost crystalline, and with occasional real crystals of calcium lactate as amuse-dents.

In Italy Parmesan has relatives, like the more widespread Grana Padano, and respectable alternatives, notably the saltier and sharper Pecorino Romano. Outside Europe *Parmigiano Reggiano* (its modern appellation) has imitators, avoided by the observant eater because they can never rival Parmesan's unique organoleptic trait, its faint and appetizing odour of baby's vomit.

Reblochon comes from a territory with a long cheese history, the duchy of Savoy. With a foot on both sides of the high Alps and its capital at Chambéry, fifteenth-century Savoy boasted not only a ducal cook who balanced the merits of Brie against those of local cheese for his banquets, but also a ducal physician and author of *Summa Lacticiniorum*, the first book in the world dedicated wholly to cheese, a book in which the best Italian and French kinds are coolly evaluated and are not overshadowed by the many types already produced in the valleys of Savoy.

Reblochon itself has little recorded history. It emerges from one of those many cheese legends: that the Alpine cowmen once had their taxes calculated on the number of pails of milk their herds produced; so it paid them to do a first milking when the landlord was about and a second milking after dark. True or false? Reblochon (from Savoyard *reblocher*, 'to give a second squeeze') is indeed the result of the late milking, low in volume, rich in cream. Produced in narrow

valleys and on high summer pastures on both sides of the high Alps, it began to make a name for itself in the 1870s, when Savoy had been divided between France and Italy, when the railways were bringing tourists to the mountains and mountain cheeses to Paris.

Yet there is a tantalizing prehistory for the foolhardy historian to attach to Reblochon. Nineteen hundred years ago

'The Cheeses': illustration by Albert Robida, *c.* 1907, for the 'Aphorisms' in Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *L'Art du Bien Manger*.

in Tarentaise, the same Alpine district where Reblochon is now made, the tribe named Ceutrones had just been conquered by the Romans. They began to export their cheese to Rome. Named *Vatusicus caseus*, it was first noticed, around AD 70, by the encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder. Of all the cheeses available at Rome, *Vatusicus* was the only one praised by Galen in his survey of *The Properties of Foods*. It was not hard, or aged, or sharp, or indigestible: it was somehow a fresh cheese, even after its long journey to Rome, and necessarily a very expensive one. Might Reblochon, with its mild, milky, mountain-cowshed flavour sealed inside its firm rind, descend directly from the *Vatusicus* of the early Roman Empire? However that may be, Reblochon today is a full-cream, unpasteurized, soft cheese, exclusively from the milk of three local breeds. A ripe disc of Reblochon, matured for about three weeks, yields to a squeeze; the interior will sag but not run when cut, and will have the creamy, warm, intimate smell of the milk that the landlord never tasted.

Of all blue cheeses, and of all sheep's-milk cheeses, Roquefort claims the longest history, but this curriculum vitae requires revision. True, the Romans liked a cheese that came to them by way of Nîmes, but it was not matured in the caves of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon in the rocky plateau of the Causses. Yes, as we shall see, Charlemagne is the first known devotee of blue cheese, but no one can say where in his vast empire the blue cheese in question was produced. No, Denis Diderot never called Roquefort *le roi des fromages*.

However, it is certainly true that in 1411 Charles VI (known for a different reason as Charles the Mad) granted a monopoly in this cheese to the village of Roquefort: by that date Roquefort and its limestone caves, in which the cheese has always been matured, were of economic importance at least regionally. And by 1642 (at the very latest) Roquefort

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A Roquefort *maître de fromage* ('master of cheese').

cheese was familiar to Parisians: in that year the Marquis de Saint-Amant included it in his poetic catalogue of cheeses in *Œuvres poétiques*. In an article on cheese in the great eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* Diderot actually called Roquefort *le premier fromage de l'Europe*, 'the first cheese of Europe'. A marbled Roquefort, its aroma only partly confined by a glass dome, takes pride of place in the overwhelming cheese shop depicted in Emile Zola's novel *Le ventre de Paris* ('The belly of Paris').

Roquefort is uncompromising among blue cheeses: hard, damp, odorous, richly streaked with the mould of *Penicillium roqueforti*, sharp, sour, salty. Some tongues recoil at it; some love it.

Italian *pecorino*, as we shall see, means 'sheep's-milk cheese'. *Vaccarino*, French *vacherin*, means 'cow's-milk cheese'; but such words easily pick up more specific meanings. In the fifteenth century there was a renowned *vaccarino* in Savoy, of which nothing more is known. Nowadays *vacherin* is the name of two cheeses which have little in common except that they are made of cow's milk. Vacherin Fribourgeois is a large disc of

semi-hard cheese from central Switzerland, a type that melts easily into a fondue. The cheeseboard displays something quite different, native to the Jura mountains on the French–Swiss border, and variously known as Mont d'Or and Vacherin du Haut-Doubs (if made in France) and Vacherin Mont d'Or (if made in Switzerland). This is a cheese so soft when ripe – soft at room temperature, even more liquid when warmed – that it is often eaten with a spoon.

Its complex flavour arouses questions: how much exactly is contributed by the flowing interior, by the soft, easily broken rind, and by the strip of spruce (*Picea abies*) that encloses the ripening cheese? And then, how to pin down the subtle differences between a Swiss Mont d'Or and a French Mont d'Or, and the difference in flavour and texture between the smaller cheeses, sold whole in their wooden boxes, and the larger Mont d'Ors sold in segments?

On a perfect cheeseboard we might include Herve, one of the world's smelliest cheeses. Like its rivals in this category (Munster, Epoisses, Maroilles, Vieux-Lille and Livarot prominent among them; Géromé and Romadur less often seen) it is washed in a nourishing alcoholic liquor as it ripens; like them it can legitimately claim a history of several centuries. It is distinct from them in having a somewhat stronger flavour.

It is less famous than some. This is because its history is shared with other names. The beer-washed cow's-milk cheese of this part of the Low Countries traditionally came to market at Limbourg, a city after which adjacent regions of Belgium and the Netherlands are named. In the old days connoisseurs would naturally discuss the matter of which Limburger cheeses were better than others; by the beginning of the nineteenth century they generally agreed that the best of all came from the Pays de Herve, whose local market, the little town of Herve, is just seven miles north-west of Limbourg.

Limburger, a strongly aromatic cheese. Limburger is one of the escaped cheese names, often made in Germany, seldom or never at Limbourg in Belgium.

'The disagreeable smell of the Limburg cheese called Herve, though unpleasant to many, is justly ranked among the delicacies of the rich', an early guide-book asserted.[2] By the early twentieth century the fame of Limburger cheese had led to the making of imitations in Germany, eastern Europe and far-off Wisconsin. The imitations are still popular but cheese-making has all but disappeared from Limbourg and its neighbourhood, and the name Limburger has become a millstone, a hindrance rather than a help to those in the Pays de Herve who continue to make the finest and most odoriferous cheese of the old type: they now simply call it Fromage de Herve.

Stilton is one of many cheeses whose true history is both longer and shorter than its legend. If the cheese of the Vale of Belvoir had made the little town of Stilton 'famous' (Daniel Defoe's word) by 1724,[3] if in 1738 the name Stilton

came into Alexander Pope's mind as the finest cheese a country mouse could dream of, then it must have been in production long before. Fame, in eighteenth-century rural England, came slowly.

Many cheeses are named not so much after the districts where they are made, more after the places where they are sold; this is a perfect example. The cheese we call Stilton was never made at, or even near, the village of Stilton (in spite of the recent discovery of a third-century Roman cheese press there). What's more, the eighteenth-century cheese that was famously sold by the landlord of the Blue Bell Inn and carried north and south by intrepid stagecoach passengers was not the Stilton we know. It was brought to Defoe's table 'with the mites, or maggots round it so thick that they bring a spoon with them for you to eat the mites with'; an almost excessively ripe cheese, then, but not necessarily blue. By the mid-nineteenth century the cheese mites were a thing of the past and *Penicillium roqueforti* was at least an option, as a hospitality manual of 1864 suggests: gastronomes might 'prefer a Stilton cheese with a green mould', but a really good Stilton was 'without any appearance of mouldiness'.[4] It was matured for far longer than any blue cheese known to modern gourmets: Stilton was at its best after at least two years' ripening, or so the grocers of the nineteenth century assured their customers.

Whatever Stilton used to be, it is now technically an unpressed blue cheese made from pasteurized cow's milk (any who want it unpasteurized have to look for the name Stichelton instead). Stilton is matured for at least nine weeks, a moderate maturing period for a blue cheese; it will reach perfection five or six weeks later still. Its terroir, its cows and its makers' skill somehow account for the lively, penetrating flavour that gives a fully ripe Stilton a distinction not currently attained by Bleu d'Auvergne or Fourme d'Ambert.

How old is Manchego? Made from the milk of manchega sheep, formed as it traditionally was by pressing cylindrical cheeses, confined in woven bands, under stones of the appropriate weight, it could have been familiar in the Spanish region of La Mancha for centuries, even millennia, without any clear written record. Those who want to find evidence for it in the novel of Don Quijote, the man of La Mancha, can find it – but not under the name *queso manchego*. That name appeared in writing, rather suddenly, towards the end of the nineteenth century. In 1882 the food writer who called himself 'Doctor Thebussem' published a list of Spanish gastronomic specialities: in this wealth of fruits, cakes, biscuits, eels, sardines and chorizos, Manchego is the only cheese that he thought worth mentioning.[5] From that period

'On sheep's milk and cheese': chapter illustration from Petrus de Crescentiis, *Liber Commodorum Ruralium*, *c.* 1490.

onwards Manchego, as if newly respectable, appears regularly in food books, novelistic feasts and travellers' picnics. Yet the name was known earlier: there can be no other explanation for the existence of a cheese called Manchego, softer and milder than its parent, in Mexico.

It deserves its fame. Relatively lightly pressed, it has an unusual open texture and a very pale golden colour; after about six months' maturing, older than *fresco* and younger than *viejo*, it has earned the adjective *curado* and its astonishingly buttery aroma and the hint of sweetness in its flavour are unmistakable. It does well alongside a slab of quince marmalade, *dulce de membrillo*.

By the end of the medieval period Brie was one of the most appreciated cheeses of Europe. There is no nationalistic exaggeration here: Italian and English authors agree in placing Brie alongside the best of their native products. Even in the fourteenth century the kings of France served it proudly at their banquets; soon afterwards the anonymous 'bourgeois de Paris', in his diary of current events in the city, measured the severity of surrounding warfare by whether Brie cheeses reached Paris. Thus royal court and commoners combined to make Brie famous. The difficulty comes when we ask the question: what was medieval Brie like? No one, at this period or long afterwards, troubles to describe it. It was, of course, a cow's-milk cheese, as it still is. It came from the district of Brie, whose good fortune in producing this splendid cheese was not independent of its geographical position just east of Paris. While other soft cheeses had no chance of gaining general fame until the railways made rapid distribution possible, it was apparently worthwhile for oxen or horses to pull cartloads of carefully packed, nearly ripened Brie to the greedy and wealthy markets of the medieval French capital. But even if it were popular in Paris, it is hard

Cheese-making in Arcadian England.

to imagine that Brie of the kind we know could have reached a greater distance, given the difficulty of handling such fragile merchandise, not to mention the rapid changes of temperature and humidity that pre-modern travel involved. Yet

Brie somehow reached London, where in 1648 Sir Kenelm Digby wrote of 'quick, fat, rich, well tasted cheese (as the best of Brye, Cheshire, &c.)'. It reached the Savoyard court at Chambéry, where in 1420 the ducal cook, Master Chiquart, required 'the very best Craponne cheese, or Brie cheese, or the very best cheese that can be had' as an ingredient in several of his most-praised dishes;[6] a generation later Brie was known to be a personal favourite of Duke Amadeus IX. Did these gourmets renew their memories of their favourite cheese on each visit to Paris, or did they taste it at home and, if so, how?

The answer is suggested by a text of 1782. 'These days we have two kinds of Brie', writes Pierre Le Grand d'Aussy in his history of French domestic life, *Histoire de la vie privée des Français*. 'We have cheeses *en table* and those which, being liquid, are served *en pot*. The latter are known as cheeses of Meaux; the best of the former are those of Nangis.' If that was the case in Paris, still more was it the case in London and Chambéry: even the less fragile Bries, those of Nangis and Melun, would have required careful excavation in the kitchen before being served *en pot* to discerning gourmets. Instead of the cheeseboard's pure white slice from a great wheel of Brie de Meaux (whose white rind is a twentieth-century novelty) we might have chosen an 'acute angle' from a smaller, irregularly mottled Brie de Nangis (see p. 114) ; an acute angle such as the *encyclopédiste* Marmontel, a penniless young writer in 1740s Paris, used to buy from the local *fruitière* for his frugal supper. The colour is golden, and the flavour and texture are probably just as he knew them: viscous and flowing on the outside, still just firm in the centre, rich, creamy and slightly sour.

Like the Alpine pastures, the high plateaux of the French Massif Central have their typical big, hard, long-matured

cow's-milk cheeses. Cantal is the name that first comes to mind, as it came to Saint-Amant's mind when he cast around for a sequel to his praise of Brie: 'Where the devil did you fish up this old tome of a Cantal', he demanded poetically in 1643, 'mouldy refuge of mites and worms, in whose hundred slimy blue, brown and green crannies a knife-point opens up a thousand veins each deserving to fetch its weight in gold?'

This is the earliest mention of cheese by the name of Cantal. If the name is in fact a mere 366 years old, no wonder local producers and consumers are not yet accustomed to it. They don't call their own cheese Cantal. They call it *fourme*, a much older name under which this or some very similar cheese is first mentioned by the earliest historian of France, Gregory of Tours, in his *On the Glory of the Confessors*. Writing in the sixth century, Gregory describes a pagan rite of a still more ancient period, in which people in the Gabalitan country used to congregate around a certain mountain lake, throw offerings into it which might include *formae casei*, 'forms of cheese, whole cheeses', and then feast for several days. On cheese? He does not say. His mention of the Gabalitan country leads us back even earlier, to Pliny in the first century. At that time it was from the Gabalitan and Lesara districts (medieval Gévaudan and modern Lozère, both on the southern edge of Cantal) that good cheese came to market at Nîmes; but it would not keep. It was only good as long as it tasted *musteus*, fresh and unfermented. Coming back to the sixteenth century we find that the cylindrical *fourmes* of southern Auvergne were liked by authors such as Desdier Christol, the French translator of Platina; and in the eighteenth century Diderot wrote that the *fourmes* of 'Cantal or Auvergne' were as good as the best that Holland could produce.

It really seems that we are tracing the history of one cheese under these various names. A difference between

Pliny's cheese and that of Saint-Amant might well be that at some intervening period the makers had begun to add more salt, improving the long-term keeping qualities of their cheese but altering its flavour profile. In 1560 Jean-Baptiste Bruyerin Champier insists in his *De re cibaria* that the *fourmes* of Auvergne were the best cheeses of France but admits that some people refused them because they were too salty.

We have come full circle. These days nearly all the Cantal in the world is sold much younger than Saint-Amant describes, and has the fresh, almost milky flavour at which Pliny hinted. However, if stored for a sufficient number of years in a cheese-merchant's cellars, a *fourme de Cantal* may still eventually house as many cheese mites as in the sixteenth century. It will then exude the warm, spicy, insectile flavour that these friendly creatures contribute to the outer reaches of a hard cheese as they commence their long labour of demolition. The cheeseboard displays a very old Cantal, or perhaps a Salers or Laguiole.

Gorgonzola is a new name for a slightly older cheese. It is the blue version of the young, creamy Stracchino, still quite widely made in northwestern Italy and once better known than it is now: *stracco* means 'tired', evidence that the cheese was traditionally made from the milk of transhumant herds on their way to and from the mountains. Tired cows gave smaller quantities of milk that was richer and more flavoursome.

The Gorgonzola legend offers dubious reasons for the invention of this famous cheese and for its naming after a cheeseless small town near Milan. The real story is simple. Stracchino cheeses, if matured for longer than usual in caves and ice houses, developed mould. The effect was liked and was eventually induced artificially; by the nineteenth century the Stracchino matured at or sold at Gorgonzola had a distinctive cylindrical shape and was a commercial

success, known as far afield as England and Germany. Now called simply Gorgonzola, it is manufactured over a large area of the middle Po valley. If two months old and *dolce* it has light greenish-blue and occasional red streaks, a texture as soft and a flavour almost as creamy as its parent: if *piccante*, aged for at least three months, it is more luridly coloured with a proud aroma that has been neatly compared to old socks.

It is not uncommon, incidentally, for cheeses to be named after places on the edge of large cities: it is not that they were necessarily made there, but that producers and buyers came together at markets or fairs in these strategic places. Thus the fifteenth-century Craponne cheeses carried the name of an insignificant village near Lyon; Saint-Félicien is said to be the name of a market square, now obliterated, in a northern quarter of Lyon; chabichou was once known by the name of Montbernage, a suburb of Poitiers.

English cheeses were already admired in Europe in the fifteenth century, but not under local names. These become prominent about a hundred years later. Banbury and Suffolk 1562, Shropshire and Cheshire about 1580;[7] then the name of Cheddar appears, for the first time in 1635, as that of a delicacy so much in demand at Charles I's court in London that Cheddar cheeses were sold before they were made. As the literature of the next hundred years confirms, it was already proverbial for being a municipal mixture of every farmer's milk: in 1697 a political poet mocked a ministry 'whose composition was like Cheder-Cheese, in whose production all the town agrees'.[8] According to Daniel Defoe, writing in 1725, Cheddar was England's best cheese. It fetched up to eightpence a pound, four times the price of Cheshire.

The early writers had been unanimous: the quality of Cheddar was tied to the magnificent situation of Cheddar

itself amid warm, rich, south-west-facing meadows. The price it fetched was so tempting that imitators set to work, confident that *terroir* is not everything. Many would say that they proved their point. By the mid-twentieth century the original cheese was overshadowed by its imitators. The old municipal cheeses were a thing of the past, and those who visited Cheddar in search of cheese were disappointed. Nowadays the Royal Cheddar of Canada, the sharp Cheddar of New England and the 'Seriously Strong Cheddar' made by a French company in Scotland are three among many that have nothing to do with Cheddar beyond the name, a likeness of flavour and (in most cases) the technique of 'cheddaring'.

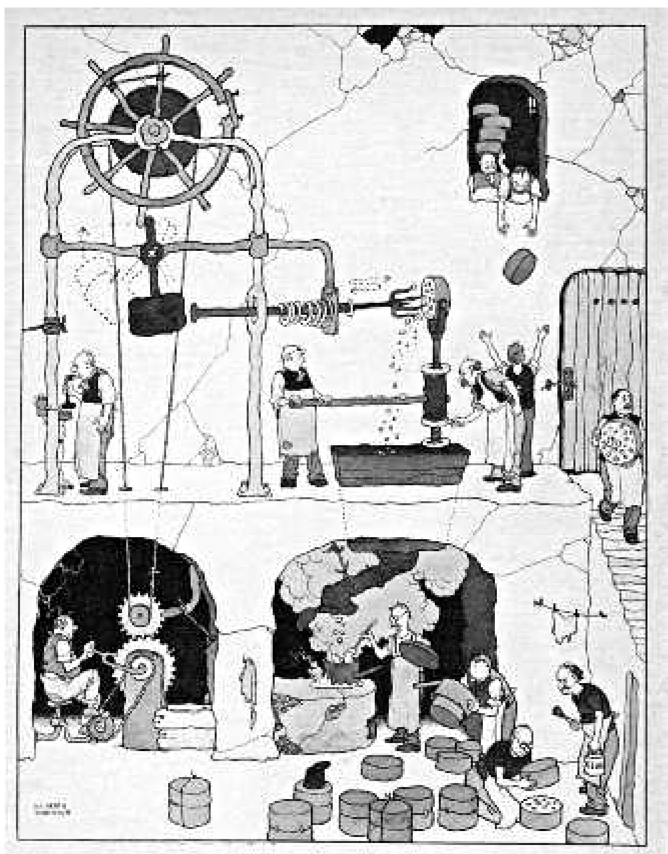
Yet Somerset is still excellent pasture for cattle. The strength, the sharpness, the farminess claimed by those other Cheddars are qualities in which they try to rival – not to

Cheese shop, Bleecker Street, in New York's Italian quarter: photo from *Life*, 1938.

surpass – the Platonic ideal Cheddar that Somerset used to produce and still can. The best 'West Country farmhouse Cheddar', as it is likely to be labelled, if matured for between nine and fifteen months, will have an enviably firm texture and a pungent flavour (earthy, some say) that very slowly dissolves in the mouth.

Our cheeseboard might well have featured two or three goat's-milk cheeses. They could be Spanish or Italian; if French, they might as well have one name as another, whether the *appellations protégées* Chabichou du Poitou, Rocamadour, Picodon and Pelardon, or the dozens or hundreds of other names that don't happen to have an appellation. That detail is almost irrelevant with these little goat's-milk cheeses. Quality matters, but it doesn't depend on name. It depends on the milk, the precise methods used by each maker, the season, the weather and other incidentals of maturing and storage. The various shapes – discs, tiles, logs and pyramids – correspond to subtle differences in ripening. Larger cheeses are also made, though less commonly, and some prefer them. In any case choice will depend on individual taste: is a perfect goat's-milk cheese soft or hard, young or old, runny or dry, tender- or tough-skinned or with spreading mould?

It is a commonplace of cheese legend that the goats of Poitou, Périgord and Aquitaine are descended from those brought by the Arabs, who, having invaded Spain and rapidly conquered almost the whole country, pressed on into France. Their advance (and, if we believe this story, that of their goats as well) was opposed by Charles Martel, who defeated them in battle near Poitiers in 732, a real landmark in the medieval history of France. This background is supposed to explain not only the popularity of goat-farming in southwestern France but also such names as *cabécou* and *chabichou*. In fact goats have been there since Roman times, and these words have no link



'Doubling Gloucester cheeses by the Gruyère method', W. Heath Robinson.

with Arabic but derive from Latin *capra*, 'goat', just like the standard French term *chèvre*.

Gruyère is a name whose origin has been fiercely debated, though not by cheese lovers or cheese historians, both of whom know that real Gruyère is a Swiss cheese. Gullible politicians have been persuaded otherwise, because cheese

Mozzarella: fresh pulled-curd buffalo's milk cheese, unique in texture and flavour.

names were once easily borrowable: which is why a good – but different – French cheese, from the region of Franche-Comté, used to be called *Gruyère de Comté*. It is now Comté, and is gaining reputation more slowly than its quality deserves, as if still making amends for having once stolen another cheese's name. The practice has a long history. Diderot, writing in the *Encyclopédie* in 1757, reported that the cheese of Franche-Comté 'imitates perfectly' that of Gruyère, and records show that it has been legal ever since 1698 to give this name to cheese made in the mountains of eastern France. Currently it still is; the EU is soon to give a verdict. There has been an Italian *Gruviera*, and there is still a Greek *Graviera*: this latter, however, is a sheep's-milk cheese that borrows methods of manufacture from its Swiss grandparent but does not claim to rival it.

Evidence of cheese-making in the Swiss canton of Fribourg, in the district called Gruyères in French and Greyerz

in German, can be found as far back as the twelfth century. By 1602, and probably long before, this cheese was being sold under the names Gruyère and Greyerzer. From the seventeenth century onwards the huge discs of Gruyère have been familiar across Europe and beyond, as the various lesser imitations show all too well. The real Gruyère (now labelled *Gruyère Switzerland*) is a slow developer, whose mildest form, *doux*, has matured for five months; the oldest versions usually found, *vieux* and *premier cru*, have waited patiently for fifteen. Its smooth, compact texture will become somewhat resistant to cutting and show occasional horizontal cracks. In its intense flavour a hazelnut note is recognized – but there is much more.

In attendance is Mozzarella di bufala. It accompanies this cheeseboard for three reasons. It is the freshest of fresh cheeses; it is the one water buffalo's-milk cheese displayed here; and it is a pulled-curd or *pasta filata* cheese, with the remarkable one-way texture that only such cheeses have.

The cow's-milk version is much cheaper and easier to find but mozzarella is at its best when made with water buffalo's milk. Although the name, and the special very fresh style, are not especially old, the moist and mossy savour of young water buffalo's-milk cheese has no doubt been known in Italy – and especially in Campagna, Lazio and Rome itself – ever since the water buffalo was introduced there. To the papal chef, Bartolomeo Scappi, who compiled his magisterial cookery book *Opera* in 1570, there was a general name, *provatura*, for whatever cheese was made from buffalo's milk; the fresher the better, he advised, and the freshest water-buffalo *provatura* was at least as good as the best fresh cheese from cow's milk. To his contemporary, the pharmacologist Pierandrea Matthioli, *privatura* was the Roman name, *mozza* the Neapolitan; under either name buffalo's-milk cheese was

‘most delightful and sweet to the taste, though fatter and more viscous than any other’.[9]

Non-Italians have taken a long time to accept this wisdom. To Champier, a French contemporary of Scappi, buffalo’s milk was noticeable only as a contaminant in suspect Italian cheese; it was of no other interest to food lovers. Nowadays both mozzarella and *provatura* (somewhat chewier) have their devotees, and the supply of real buffalo’s-milk cheese comes nowhere near meeting the gourmet demand.

2
History

So the first history of cheese is the history of individual cheeses. Fifty or a hundred could have been chosen, and each new name would add another detail. Some we could show to be ancient, some we would know or suspect to be modern. Some would have a solid recorded history, some might scarcely have impinged on the written record. A few, like Parmesan, would have remained for hundreds of years practically unchanged; others, like Stilton and Camembert, would have evolved into new and perhaps finer forms.

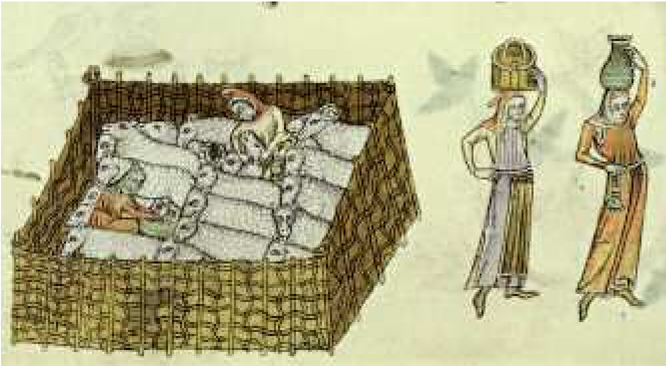
A second history of cheese is that of the gradual spread of the cheese idea from the distant and unrecoverable moment of its invention. Accordingly this chapter begins by focusing on the distant moment, thereafter following the cheese idea in an approximate spiral from its Near Eastern origins to its triumphant implanting in the New World.

The Idea of Cheese

The story necessarily begins with milk, a good and nourishing food for humans. We learn this fact instinctively, as infants, by feeding on mother's milk; if we keep domestic animals we

may learn it over again by observing how their young are fed and, more adventurously, by tasting the milk ourselves. That is certainly how our ancestors in the western half of the Old World learned to use the milk of domestic animals.

The earliest domestication of a milk-producing animal probably took place about nine thousand years ago. If we allow ourselves to build history from known archaeological sites, it may have been in the Zagros mountains of north-western Iran that goats, which were already being herded seasonally in many temperate regions of the Old World, first began to live and reproduce under continuous human control. At roughly the same date, somewhere in the Middle East, sheep were also domesticated. Perhaps slightly later, cattle were domesticated too; this may have first occurred either in the Middle East or in the Sahara, which was at that time far less arid than it later became. The water buffalo was domesticated in China and eastern Asia, probably in the fifth millennium BC (it didn't arrive in the Mediterranean region until the sixth century AD). The domestication of the camel in southern Arabia possibly dates from about 2200 BC.



Milking sheep in the pen and maids carrying the milk, from the Luttrell Psalter, *c.* 1340.

So when did the milk of these animals begin to be used? Archaeologists hesitate. Nearly thirty years ago Andrew Sherratt bounced them towards an answer with his hypothesis of a 'secondary products revolution' around 3500 BC in the Near East. Before that date, he argued, humans in Eurasia kept domesticated animals only for the meat, bones and hide available when they were slaughtered. After that date the idea of additional, 'renewable' uses of animals, for the milk, wool and labour that they offered without killing them, was adopted rapidly in western Asia, in Europe and as far east as India.

The theory was based largely on negative evidence, because secondary uses of animal products in pre-industrial societies left little trace for an archaeologist of the early 1980s to find. But Sherratt succeeded in his aim. In the last 25 years researchers' attention has increasingly focused on the question, and routes to a more reliable answer have been explored. One answer will come by way of kill-off patterns; in other words, the age at slaughter of domestic animals, as evident from surviving bones. If correctly interpreted, these results should show whether herds and flocks were kept mostly for meat or whether wool and milk production were main activities. Another answer will come from analysis of lipid and protein residues in pots, which can be made to reveal whether they once contained meat fats or milk fats.[1] But the data so far known is hardly conclusive. Kill-off patterns have been thought to change in the direction of dairy farming by 4000 BC in central and southeastern Europe.[2] From lipid analysis it is clear that the collecting of milk was taking place by about the same date even in southern Britain, a long way from the likely centres of innovation.

Milk is a very unstable food. Without refrigeration it spoils within days, even within hours in hot weather; without

modern means of packing and transport it will not travel. In addition the supply is irregular: in nature there are long seasons when cows, goats and sheep produce no milk, although farmers have learned to extend the period of lactation. Milk becomes a fully reliable resource when it can be converted into a product that will keep; until that was possible farmers needed to rely extensively on slaughtering to maintain a supply of protein (as we would say) through the year. So the discovery of cheese may well have been central to the putative secondary products revolution. First, at whatever date, herders began to milk their animals for human nutrition. At some later time they learned to make the milk into cheese, a stable and regular food source. This in itself could have catalysed the real revolution, the beginning of heavy reliance on dairy farming.

To return to the discovery itself, it was surely no momentous event. Milk, left to stand, will quickly sour from the action of lactic acid bacteria and may begin to curdle. If one carries or stores it in a bag made from an animal's stomach, it will encounter rennet – the enzyme which, in the stomach, curdles milk as a step in the process of digestion – and this will start, or will magically hasten, the curdling process. Some alternative substances will be found, by accident or experiment, to have a similar effect. The resulting curds will become easier to deal with as whey drains out of them; they will be more useful still if they are pressed to encourage further draining. Salt, perhaps already known to be useful in preparing meat for storage, can be used in much the same way and will turn out to be similarly useful as an additive to young cheese.

There is a remaining problem. Mammals, including humans, once they have been weaned, lose the ability to digest lactose, because their digestive systems cease to produce the

A 110 lb provolone at Brooklyn Terminal Market, New York, 1959.

necessary enzyme lactase. The majority of adult humans worldwide today cannot digest fresh milk, though the ability to do so, a new development at some unidentified prehistoric moment, is shared by most people in northeast and north Africa, Europe, northern and western Asia, and by some people in southern Asia and the Americas.[3]

Now it is true that really well-aged cheese, being almost lactose-free, poses no problem to those who are lactose intolerant; but the practice of maturing cheese for a year or more depends on complex procedures and specialized labour; there must have been a gap of hundreds if not thousands of years between the first young cheese and the first *extra vieux* cheese. It is also true that pulled-curd or *pasta filata* cheese, such as traditional mozzarella and provolone, contains practically no lactose even though fresh. But this, too, is not a simple

Even if not as old as the Domesday Book, Cheshire is England's oldest surviving named cheese.

method: the curd, after draining, is typically steeped in very hot whey for several hours; then, as it rises to the surface, it is drained again and repeatedly kneaded and pulled to an elastic texture and finally cut into cheeses (some kinds are eaten fresh, some matured). However pleasing its texture, however useful its digestibility, the idea of *pasta filata* surely did not arise overnight.

The conclusion asserts itself. The novel ability to digest milk must, in its historical origin, somehow coincide with the origin of dairy farming, because, without that ability, milk and most of the products made from it would have been useless. Frederick Simoons drew attention to this conjuncture thirty years ago, but bio-cultural history has not yet contributed all that it one day will to the development of a full prehistory of cheese.

The Spread of Cheese

The direct evidence for cheese begins with the third millennium BC. In saying this I discount the so-called cheese strainers, the pierced earthenware containers sometimes found by archaeologists. The earliest example, from central Europe, is dated to about 5500 BC; there are several others from southeastern Europe and Crete dated to about 3000 BC and later, but it is far from certain that cheese strainers is what they are. Analysis of lipid residues may very soon prove or disprove it.[4] Meanwhile the earliest direct evidence for cheese comes from Egypt, thanks to the remarkable climate which preserves organic substances that would long since have disappeared almost everywhere else. So it is that a strange substance found in two jars from a tomb of the Egyptian First Dynasty (*c.* 3100 to 2900 BC), with inscriptions that were read as '*rwt* of the north' and '*rwt* of the south', was examined (but not, apparently, tasted) by a succession of puzzled archaeologists and was eventually pronounced to be cheese. The identification was not helped by the fact that '*rwt*' was a doubtful reading; in any case it is an unknown word, the ancient Egyptian term for cheese being otherwise unrecorded. There is, however, no doubt that the monarchs of the first dynasty were credited with having united Egypt (the 'two lands', as the country was called for some time afterwards); there is also no doubt that Egyptians by this time were practised cattle-herders. Presenting cheese from both north and south to a deceased First Dynasty dignitary would make perfect political sense. If these conclusions are correct, they offer a hint that there were at least two kinds of cheese, worth distinguishing by their geographical origin, in Egypt of 3000 BC. We have not only the earliest surviving cheese, but the earliest recorded appellations.

At the same date the Sumerian civilization was flourishing in southern Iraq. Sumerian literature, written in a language unrelated to any modern tongue, was gradually deciphered during the last century with the help of bilingual texts and glossaries in Akkadian. The Sumerian word for cheese, *ga-har*, is found in literature from the late third millennium BC. Cheese from cow's, goat's and sheep's milk was known; a distinction, significant to shepherds ever since, was already made between small cheeses, likely to be used when fresh, and large cheeses made for longer maturing.[5] There is more: the Sumerian-Akkadian glossaries include lists of food, and among these lists are 'white cheese', 'fresh cheese', 'rich cheese', 'sharp cheese' and various flavours making up a total of twenty distinct cheeses, distinct at least in the minds of the Akkadian teachers of Sumerian. Most of them surely had a distinct identity in the Sumerian texts themselves, and therefore, we may reasonably deduce, in the markets of Sumerian cities in the late third millennium.

In Akkadian the basic word for cheese[6] was *eqīdum*, and there were several more names for cheeses in addition to the eighteen or twenty identified from the Sumerian glossary; some of the names were borrowed from neighbouring languages both west and east. *Nagahu* was maybe the name for a smelly cheese, because the word was also used as an insult; *kabu*, literally 'dung', when used as a cheese name might (like French *crottin*) allude to the shape rather than the smell. It appears from glossaries that there were cheeses flavoured with wine, dates and various herbs, but how the flavour was added is not known. A few cookery recipes survive in Akkadian, and they tell us that cheese was used as an ingredient.

In Hittite writings, from central Anatolia in the mid-second millennium BC, we find that a cheese could be large or small; it could be *huelpi*: 'fresh', *damaššanzi*: 'pressed', *paršān*:

‘broken, crumbled’, *iškallan*: ‘torn’, *hašhaššan*: perhaps ‘scraped’. It could be ‘dry’ and ‘old’; it could be ‘incised’ (perhaps marked to show its origin); there was even ‘aged soldier cheese’, which might or might not have been better than it sounds. Such adjectives are interesting less for what they say than for the oppositions they imply: cheese was, by this time, evaluated on several scales. It was doled out in *purpurruš*: ‘balls’ or in ‘loaves’ (presumably a difference between small and large whole cheeses) which might be broken into *paršulli*: ‘chunks’, like those from a Parmesan.

In the ancient Near East, probably the part of the world where cheese was first made, early literature offers us just these few tantalizing glimpses of cheese gastronomy: this much and no more. Later, cheese was an occasional cooking ingredient in medieval Arabic cuisine; it is still a significant food in these countries today, though far less varied, and gastronomically less compelling, than in western Europe.

Cheese drying on the roof of a Bedouin tent, Arabia, early 20th century.

We now move westwards. In an excavation on the small Greek island of Therasia, at a settlement buried by the Santorini eruption at or near 1627 BC, a grey substance was found which nineteenth-century archaeologists belived to be cheese. Cheese is mentioned in Linear B tablets, written in southern Greece and Crete during the thirteenth century BC. In these laconic accounts cheese is measured in units – whole cheeses – and the standard Mycenaean cheese was not so very small if we reflect that on one such tablet, a list of requisites for feasting from 'Nestor's palace' at Pylos, ten cheeses are listed alongside an amount calculated at 86.4 litres of wine.[7] Oddly enough we can compare this with a calculation from the same part of Greece about a thousand years later:

> The man who was appointed victualler at Phigaleia would bring each day three *choai* [8 litres] of wine, one *medimnos* [50 litres] of barley meal, five *mnai* [2½ kg] of cheese, and whatever was needed to season the sacrificial meat. The city provided . . . three sheep, a cook, a rack for water-jars, tables, benches and all such furniture . . . The meal began with cheese and barley mash served on bronze platters . . . Alongside the barley and cheese came charcuterie and salt as relish. When they had blessed this food, each man might drink a little from an earthenware vessel, and the server would say: '*Eudeipnias*, Dine well!'[8]

Much of Greece is poor cattle-raising country; in early times most of its cheese was from sheep's and goat's milk, but scientists such as Aristotle (who wrote in the fourth century BC) had made observations well beyond the local context.

> Milk contains a serum called *orros* 'whey' and a solid called *tyros* 'cheese'; the thicker the milk, the more cheese. The

Goat's milk cheese hung out to dry on a house wall in Greece, 1960.

milk of animals without upper incisors coagulates and, under domestication, is made into cheese . . . Camel's milk is lightest, mare's second, ass's third; cow's milk is thickest . . . Some animals produce enough milk for their young and an additional quantity that can be set aside and turned into cheese. This is true particularly of sheep and goats, and to a smaller extent cows; mare's milk and ass's milk are incorporated in Phrygian cheese. There is more cheese in cow's milk than goat's milk: herders say that they get nineteen *trophalides* worth one *obol* apiece from one amphora [26 litres] of goat's milk, whereas from that quantity of cow's milk they get thirty.[9]

Aristotle does not discuss the maturing of cheese. From reading him one might assume that the small *trophalides*, fresh cheeses selling for a tiny silver coin, were typical; also that science can explain everything. Even the very oldest texts – the Homeric epics – show that this is not the whole story. In the *Iliad* Nestor, after a busy day at the siege of Troy, is revived by a posset consisting of grated cheese mixed into wine, and the poet tells us exactly how it was done: 'First she moved a table up to them, a fine polished table with a dark gleaming stand, and on it she placed a bronze dish with an onion in it as relish to the drink, and also yellow honey; and next came the heap of holy barley meal; and then a splendid goblet . . . in which she made a *kykeon* "posset" for them with Pramnian wine, and grated goat's cheese into it with a bronze grater, and sprinkled barley meal on it, and invited them to drink.'[10] We notice the bronze grater – they are occasionally found at Greek archaeological sites of this period – and the cheese that was not just mature but hard enough to grate. Some of the epic detail seems incongruous; even more so when it is echoed in the *Odyssey* as Odysseus and his men are welcomed to Circe's magic island: 'She led them in and sat them on chairs and stools, and stirred for them cheese and barley meal and yellow honey into Pramnian wine, and mixed harmful drugs with the food', with the result that Odysseus's men were turned into pigs; but the *kykeon*, a mixture made by stirring in just the way that milk is stirred while it curdles, had deep religious overtones. The gods were not far off when butter or cheese was made in the mountain pastures. 'Often on the mountain tops, when the torchlit feast delights the gods, you have brought along your golden bowl – a big pail such as shepherds have – and filled it with lioness's milk and made a big firm cheese for Apollo, Killer of Argos', sang Alkman, the poet

Feta, the best-known of the brine-matured Greek cheeses.

of early Sparta, picturing a ritual that combines the real and the supernatural.[11]

Greece in Roman and medieval times continued to produce cheese. It came particularly from the northern mountains and the big island of Crete, where European travellers often saw it for sale. 'They make a great many cheeses', wrote the pilgrim Pietro Casola of his landfall at Chania in 1497. 'It is a pity they are so salty. I saw great warehouses full of them, some in which the brine, or *salmoria* as we would say, was two feet deep, and the large cheeses were floating in it. Those in charge told me that the cheeses could not be preserved in any other way, being so rich . . . they sell a great quantity to the ships that call there: it was astonishing to see the number of cheeses taken on board our own galley.'[12] In modern Greece, although cheeses matured in

brine are still among the best known, there is an unexpected variety of local cheeses, still mostly from goat's and sheep's milk.

Sicily, which had been partly colonized by Greeks, was the one significant exporter of cheese to early Greece: goat's milk gave Sicilian cheese its quality, or so Aristotle assumed, while sheep's milk added bulk. Thus we move westwards again, to Italy, where it is evident from Latin literature that under the Roman Empire *caseus* ('cheese') was both a favourite food and a luxury. If a meal or hospitality is described, cheese will figure, as in the rustic tavern somewhere in Italy that is sketched in *Copa* ('The Bar-Girl'), a poem sometimes ascribed to Virgil: 'There is *vin ordinaire* just poured from a pitchy jar, and a watercourse running by with an insistent murmur . . . there are *caseoli* "little cheeses" dried in rush baskets, waxy autumn-ripe plums, blood-coloured mulberries . . .'.

Milking on the Wengernalp, Bernese Oberland, Switzerland: postcard, *c.* 1895.

The Roman Empire, with its army, its administration and its roads, fostered trade in high quality commodities throughout the Mediterranean; this was the only period in history when the whole Mediterranean coastline was open to travel under a single government. Italy itself, Spain, Gaul (France), the Alpine provinces, Greece and Anatolia (Turkey) are all named in literature and documents as producers of cheese. For example, the fantasy plot of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) has a well-constructed naturalistic opening in which the hero shares a journey in the hills of central Greece with a commercial traveller: 'I'll tell you my trade: I hunt about through Thessaly, Aetolia, Boeotia, for honey and cheese and all that line of grocery.' For the Romans, as for the Hittites before them, cheese was a typical army food, alongside bacon and vinegary wine.

Cheese was made throughout western and central Europe long before the Roman Empire; but we can know little about it. In this sense alone, the history of cheese in Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria and Italy may reasonably be said to begin with the Romans. All these

Cheese at the dockside, Amsterdam: aquatint by Reiner Zeeman (1623–1667).

countries continued to produce cheese through medieval times, and the general names for cheese in the Romance languages are inherited from Latin *caseus* (*queijo*, *queso*, *cacio*, *cas*) or from a late Latin *forma* as the term for a cheese-mould and hence for a cheese shaped in a mould (*fourme*, *fromage*, *formaggio*).[13] As available information increases, around the year 1500, we find Italy, France and Switzerland very prominent as producers and exporters, a position that all three countries have retained. Spain and Austria, though less is known of their cheeses in the intervening period, are important producers nowadays; Portugal and Belgium are not without good local cheese.

North of this large region are more countries sufficiently influenced by the Empire and its culture to have borrowed their name for cheese from Latin *caseus* (Irish *cāise*, Welsh *caws*, English *cheese*, Dutch *kaas*, German *Käse*). These countries produced cheese before and during Roman times – Roman sources confirm it – but their recorded cheese history begins with the Middle Ages. Among them, Holland gained special fame in the seventeenth century for its good, big, round, bright-coloured cheeses known abroad under such names as Dutch cheese and Tête de mort. All these countries have remained important producers, except Ireland, whose cheese tradition was largely wiped out under British rule.[14] In Britain itself the restrictions of World War II inflicted lasting damage on cheese traditions, damage that has taken many decades to repair.

Beyond this again are countries that lay wholly beyond the reach of the Empire's trade. In general, until relatively modern times, few or no details are known of their cheeses; if there appears now to be less diversity in their cheese traditions, a smaller time depth might explain the fact. This applies to Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic

Children who like cheese: British girls eating cheese, 1941.

republics, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the former Yugoslav countries, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia, Ukraine and Russia. The general Balto-Slavic word for cheese (Russian *sir*) is cognate, via proto-Indo-European, with English *sour*; a second term (Russian *tvarog*), used for 'cottage cheese, fresh cheese', is borrowed into modern German as

Quark with the same meaning. Meanwhile the original Germanic term, source of the modern Scandinavian *ost*, was borrowed long ago into Finnish, as *juusto*: 'cheese'. The borrowings that resulted in German *Käse*, English *cheese* and Finnish *juusto* are not evidence that these peoples had no earlier knowledge of cheese, but they do suggest that improvements in cheese-making technique were at some stage introduced from outside – from the south, in fact.

Ancient authors reported that cheese was made by the pastoralists of what is now southern Russia. 'The nomads pitch their felt tents on the wagons on which they spend their lives', writes the Roman geographer and historian Strabo in his *Geography*. 'Around the tents are the herds from which they get their milk and cheese and meat. They follow the grazing herds, ever shifting to find pasture; in winter they are around the marshes of the Sea of Azov, in summer

Quark, a German equivalent of *fromage frais*; and Liptauer, a spicy mix typically made with Quark to which caraway, paprika, onions and other unexpected ingredients are added.

in the steppes.' That was as far as Roman knowledge extended to the north-east, but we may surely extrapolate a little. If cheese was known at the western end of the Eurasian steppes, it was known at the eastern end too, in Mongolia, where nowadays goat's-, sheep's-, cow's- and yak's-milk cheeses are all made; it was known in central Asia, where it remains significant today.

This leads us across the roof of the world to China, where it has been argued that the northern Chinese eventually avoided the use of milk and cheese specifically to distinguish themselves from these nomadic peoples to their north-west. Cheese is by no means unknown in Chinese food history, however. China today produces about as much cheese, year by year, as Great Britain – a rather small quantity per head of population, therefore, but not negligible. In the north it is indeed unfamiliar, but Yunnan in southwestern China has a speciality in goat's-milk cheese, which is preferred fresh, as it often is elsewhere.

South East Asia and India are almost cheese-free with the exception of India's *panīr*, a delicacy introduced in medieval times from Iran, a white unsalted fresh cheese that is appropriate to its Hindu context because it is curdled with an acid such as lemon juice or vinegar.

To complete this rapid survey of the Old World, North Africa is among the most ancient cheese-making regions; Strabo confirms (as we would expect) that cheese remained familiar there, well beyond the reach of Roman power, two millennia ago. Cheese is still a significant food item north of the Sahara, in the lower and middle Nile valley, in Ethiopia and Somalia. In Egypt, northeastern Africa and Saudi Arabia a fresh white cheese, *jubna baydā'*, known in Egypt as *damyātī*, is the most popular type; the chewier *ḥalūm*, traditionally made from mixed goat's and sheep's milk, is also

Oranda ('Holland') as the land of cheese, 1861 Japanese print.

familiar all around the eastern Mediterranean. Camel's-milk cheese – laborious to make because the fat does not separate easily – has been known in the region for at least two thousand years. Southwards, however, there is a sharp dividing line,

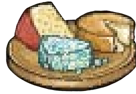
‘Swiss cheese’ served to customers at First Avenue Market, New York, 1938.

running across the whole African continent from north-west to east, beyond which nearly the whole adult population is lactose-intolerant. In central and southern Africa, therefore, cheese is scarcely consumed at all, except by the Khoe-San of South Africa and Namibia and by Europeans.

The peoples of America and Australia before European settlement did not use milk as a food in any form. Europeans introduced their domestic animals and began to make cheese in the way they knew from home. At first cheese-making practices did not differ much from those in Europe. The potential for change existed (so it may seem from hindsight) in the large-scale farming and long-distance trade of this ‘New World’; and the way ahead had already been indicated by seventeenth-century municipal Cheddar, made by a ‘co-operative’ that accepted milk from every local farmer to

produce each day's cheese. Cheddar was not alone: the big Alpine cheeses were also made co-operatively. But it was the Cheddar type of cheese that was made in New England, and it was in New England, in 1851 and after, that milk began to be collected on a larger and larger scale, by true associations and co-operatives, and eventually by businesses also. By the late nineteenth century cheese factories were being built in other countries too, and the economies of scale were so compelling that, flavour and quality notwithstanding, in the early twenty-first century factory cheeses are the norm and farm cheeses are the exception. A second contribution of the US was the development of processed cheese, a stable amalgam containing cheese and non-cheese in roughly equal amounts (the non-cheese components introduce extra salt, milk fats and lactose to the cocktail). Today the US produces annually more than twice as much cheese as France, making it by far the largest producer in the world. It has in the past rarely been lauded for cheese quality, but US cheese can no longer be summarily dismissed in this way. Small in production terms but sometimes outstanding in the quality they achieve, artisanal cheese-makers have fought a long war for their country's gastronomic reputation; they win laurels even on European battlegrounds.

3
Making



One of the most striking facts about modern cheese – the astonishing range of textures and tastes to be found in what is essentially a single product – was already a fact two thousand years ago, probably three thousand, maybe even four thousand. This real and significant continuity has been a temptation to the producers and publicists of individual modern cheeses, who are given to making precise historical claims for which evidence is absent. These claims may actually obscure the truth; for example, the familiar and traditional claim that Marie Harel of Camembert first made Camembert in 1792 swept aside the fact that at Vimoutiers soon after 1700 and at Pont l'Evêque in the 1760s observers saw cheeses on sale that already bore the name of Camembert.[1] Not far away, makers of Neufchâtel cheese – a highly respectable name from the late eighteenth century onwards – claim to trace it back to the eleventh and even the sixth century. Such claims are given a specious importance by gastronomes and bureaucrats who demand a historical patina. A Europe-wide designation is a worthwhile prize: can the modest makers of Exmoor Blue, or the less modest makers of Buxton Blue, be blamed for flavouring their cheeses with a little history in order to obtain it?

The Aylesbury Dairy Company puts cheese on display: engraving from the *Illustrated London News*, 1876.

Yes, many styles of cheese must surely go back to early times. A whey cheese such as the Greek *myzithra* is likely to be much older in practice than the earliest record of its name in the seventeenth century. The same may be said for the long-maturing Scandinavian *gamalost*, a pungent hard cheese made from skimmed milk. Quite possibly some Sicilian cheeses still produced today resemble the Sicilian cheeses liked by the ancient Athenians and those used in cookery by the medieval Arabs but, since no early descriptions survive, we cannot claim that it is so. Quite possibly the modern Sicilian sheep's-milk cheese *canestratu*, named after the baskets in which it is moulded, is just like the cheeses that the poet of the *Odyssey* imagined in the Cyclops' cave, and it is true that many ancient readers identified that legendary island with Sicily; but history cannot be built on such foundations. It is the sympathetic cheese historian's task to puncture the false claims and point in the direction of the truth. So the third history of cheese has to be an exploration, based on historical evidence, of continuity and variety in cheese-making.

The Continuity of Cheese

Continuity is easily and clearly demonstrated in historical records of the cheese-making process.

In all surviving literature the oldest such description appears – all too briefly, as an aside from the plot – in one of the early Greek epics already mentioned above. In the *Odyssey* the unreliable Odysseus tells of an encounter with the gigantic, one-eyed Cyclops, who tended goats and sheep. Exploring the monster's cave, Odysseus found 'wicker trays full of cheeses and pens crowded with lambs and kids; each were in their proper places, the firstlings, the middles and the younglings;

A Roman farmer sits on a wicker stool to milk a goat; 3rd-century relief, Museo Nazionale, Rome.

and all the vessels brimming with whey, the neat pails and bowls into which he milked his beasts'. Further details were filled in when the Cyclops came home: he 'sat down to milk his sheep and bleating goats, all in turn, and then put a suckling to each. Afterwards he curdled half of the white milk and put it aside in woven baskets', keeping the other half for drinking.

Next, for fuller cheese-making instructions, we can look to the Roman authors of farming books, beginning with Varro, a polymath and contemporary of Augustus who understood the business of farming in Italy thoroughly.

> They begin to make cheese at the spring rising of the Pleiades[2] . . . In spring they milk early for cheese-making, in other seasons around midday, though owing to geography and to differences in food it is not the same everywhere. To coagulate two *congii* [6½ litres] of milk they add an olive-sized amount of rennet. Hare's or kid's rennet is better than lamb's; other people, though, use the milk from a fig branch and vinegar as rennets, and various other things classed as *opos* in Greek . . . Those who add salt prefer rock to sea salt.

To his practical advice Varro adds a typical scrap of antiquarianism: because of this property of fig sap the shepherds of early Rome had planted a fig tree beside the altar of their patron goddess Rumina. We will be returning later to vegetable rennets and to Varro's mention of vinegar. In a poem on the farmer's life Virgil adds a perspective on the daily routine from the shepherd's viewpoint: 'What they milk at sunrise and in daylight hours, they press at night. What they milk at dusk and sunset they either carry to market in wicker baskets at daybreak – if the shepherd is off to town – or else tinge sparingly with salt and set aside till winter.'

Columella, who farmed in Spain and Italy two generations after Varro, compiled a much more detailed guide to farming, in which some important elements of the cheese-making process emerge for the first time. Additional vegetable rennets are noted, 'the flower of the cardoon and the seeds of safflower'.[3] The milk must be kept warm while curdling, then immediately transferred to wicker baskets or moulds (*formae*);

> Country people put weights on the cheese, as soon as it has become a little more solid, to press out the whey.

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Heating the milk: detail from a wooden grave cross, 20th century, Sapânta, Romania.

When taken out of the moulds or baskets it is put in a dark cold place so as not to spoil; it is arranged on perfectly clean boards, sprinkled with ground salt to draw out the acid liquor; when hardened it is pressed even more forcefully to compact it; then it is treated again with roasted salt and again pressed. After nine days of this treatment the cheeses are washed and arranged without touching one another, out of the light, on wicker trays made for this purpose, to dry out somewhat; then they are stacked close together on shallow shelves in a room that is closed and out of the wind.

The aim of this careful maturing was to produce a mature cheese that retained its flavour and was not full of holes or salty or dry, a cheese that 'can even be exported overseas'.

Agriculture students gather around a cheese press, Hampton, Virginia, 1900.

The Byzantine Greek farming textbook *Geoponika* seems to draw much of its material from Greek writers of the later Roman Empire; it contains a brief section on cheese that adds a few details to the tradition. 'The hairy, inedible parts of globe artichokes' are named as another possible vegetable rennet, paralleling Columella's mention of the cardoon, the artichoke's wild relative. Then there is a brief but important note: 'Cheese keeps white in brine.' Not only is this true; it is also the first direct evidence of the maturing and storing of cheese in brine, a practice that is still normal in Greece and neighbouring countries. Finally, the *Geoponika* offers an interesting brief recipe for conserving small cheeses: 'Cheese keeps if washed in drinking water and dried in the sun, then packed in earthenware jars with savory or thyme, the cheeses kept apart from one another so far as possible, then sweet vinegar or honey vinegar poured over until the liquid fills the gaps and covers them.'

Columella, the Roman farming author already quoted, ends his instructions with a one-sentence reminder of the vices of cheese: 'In this way it will not be holey or salty or dry. The first of these vices occurs if it is under-pressed; the second if over-salted, the third if scorched by the sun.' On some such basis, medieval cheese-fanciers eventually developed a clip-board tabulation of what might be wrong with bad cheese, a mnemonic list to which explanations were attached. This was evidently passed on in oral tradition, and we have three very different written records of it. The first version is in an anonymous Parisian household handbook, *Le Mesnagier de Paris*, compiled by an older husband for a younger bride in about 1393. 'Good cheese has six qualities', he advises, and then suddenly switches into Latin:

Non Argus nec Helena nec Maria Magdalena
Sed Lazarus et Martinus respondens Pontifici!

Roman shepherd on his way to market, carrying fresh cheeses in a basket and a spring lamb on his shoulders.

The jingle is easy enough to translate: 'Not Lazarus, not Helen, not Mary Magdalene, but Lazarus and Martin answering back to the Pope.' But what does it have to do with cheese? Fortunately the young bride was about to ask the same question. Her husband therefore explains: 'Not white like Helen [of Troy]; not tearful like Mary Magdalene; not like [hundred-eyed] Argus but blind; as heavy as a bull and resisting the

thumb [as the fat twelfth-century jurist, Martino Gosia, resisted the pope]; and with a mangy coat [like Lazarus's sores].' In Paris around 1400 cheese should not be white or dry; it should not have holes ('eyes') or contain trapped whey; it should be heavy, with a firm texture and a patchy rind. The word I translate as mangy, *teigneux*, might mean specifically 'gnawed by mites'; this could be the meaning intended here, but although some cheeses, like Cantal, are excellent when in that condition, the majority – including the Brie that Paris householders often bought – never reach it.

The second version of this proverbial wisdom is to be found in an English text from the end of the sixteenth century – Thomas Cogan's *The Haven of Health*: 'Cheese should not be as white as snow is, not full of eyes as Argos was, nor old as Methusalem was, nor full of whey and weeping as Marie Magdalen was, nor rough as Esau was, nor full of spots as Lazarus.' Here are hundred-eyed Argus, Lazarus and Mary Magdalene once again. They prove that we are dealing with the same tradition, but some details are different. Lazarus's sores exemplify a fault to be avoided, and we are reminded that cheese can get too old.

A third version, the fullest of all, is found among the homely rhymes of farming advice by the Essex eccentric Thomas Tusser. In *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* he inserted some sharp injunctions to an imaginary dairymaid, Cisley (Cicely), concerning her inexpert cheese-making. Tusser begins:

> Gehazi, Lot's wife, and Argus his eyes;
> Tom Piper, poor cobler, and Lazarus' thighs;
> Rough Esau, with Maudlin, and gentils that scrawl,
> With bishop that burneth, thus know ye them all.

Like his French predecessor, Tusser then goes on to explain. A few lines of his doggerel are enough to give the flavour:

> Gehazi his sickness was whitish and dry:
> Such cheeses, good Cisley, ye floted too nigh . . .
> Rough Esau was hairy from top to the foot . . .
> If gentils be scrawling call Maggot-the-pye . . .

The white, dry cheese likened to the white leprosy of Elisha's servant, Gehazi, has lost too much of its substance to the cream and butter which a dairymaid was also expected to supply. Esau, the hairy man, serves as a warning against downy mildew. The 'gentles' that will be of special interest to a magpie are the larvae of the cheese fly, *Pyophila casei*. There is much more; this is the most complicated form that the rules of thumb for good and bad cheese ever assumed. The simplest form is the modern Italian proverb, *Pane alluminato e cacio cieco*, 'Bread that sees, blind cheese', a reminder that well-pressed cheese has no eyes, while well-raised bread is full of them.

Simple or complex, these rules can be countered in a moment by an observation that we can all make; surely Cisley eventually dared to put it into words. One good cheese is not like the next. There are good, dry, hard whey cheeses; there are good cheeses with eyes; there are good cheeses very nearly as tough as a poor cobbler's shoes. One person's good cheese is not like the next, as Thomas Tusser's near-contemporary, the playwright John Heywood, wrote in a poetic comparison of 'Books and Cheese' (note that the word *he* must be stressed each time it occurs):

> He saith, ''Tis too salt;' he saith, ''Tis too fresh;'
> He saith, ''Tis too hard;' he saith, ''Tis too nesh.'[4]

'It is too strong of the rennet,' saith he;
'It is,' he saith, 'not strong enough for me.'
'It is,' saith another, 'well as can be.'

The Variety of Cheese

John Heywood shows us the way from cheese in its unity to cheese in its variety. Early writers already quoted have suggested several pairs of distinctive features (new and old, soft and hard, 'sweet' and salty, mild and strong), but the usual implication is that all other measures somehow depend on the simple distinction between new and old: Heywood himself, with his shorthand opposition between 'salt' and 'fresh', demonstrates this. Another near-contemporary, the dietary author Andrew Boorde, was aware of the weakness of this assumption, and tried to improve on his sources with a new

Salting the curd, Antigo, Wisconsin, 1941.

division into four kinds of cheese, distinguishing the digestive effect ('operation') of each in his *A Compendyous Regyment*:

> There is iiij. [4] sortes of chese, which is to say, grene chese, softe chese, harde chese [and] spermyse. Grene chese is not called grene by ye reason of colour, but for ye newnes of it, for the whay is not half pressed out of it, and in operacion it is colde and moyste. Softe chese not to new nor to olde is best, for in operacion it is hote and moyste. Harde chese is hote and drye, and euyll to dygest. Spermyse is a chese the which is made with curdes and with the iuce of herbes. Yet besyde these .iiij [4] natures of chese, there is a chese called a irwene chese, the whiche, if it be well ordered, doth passe all other cheses.

Since he had to add a fifth kind as an afterthought, it is clear that this classification did not satisfy even its author. 'Spermyse', incidentally, was a cottage cheese, typically curdled with *Galium verum*, lady's bedstraw; 'irwene', elsewhere spelt 'ruen', seems to have resembled yoghurt.

A slightly later author, Thomas Vaughan, saw that there was more to it than this. In 1626 he wrote in *Directions for Health* of 'the diversities of cheese according to the nature of the beasts, the cow, ewe and goat; the nature of the ground, hilly, meddow and marshy; the nature of the time, for the summer is better than winter; but above all, the cunning of the dairy-woman'. Bruyerin Champier, a near contemporary, adds more variables: the animals' pasture or fodder, the size and shape of the cheese.

The last feature in Vaughan's list (we may paraphrase it as 'the skill of the cheese-maker') is rightly evaluated 'above all', especially when we realize that it involves two variables in creative opposition: tradition and inventiveness. Outside

Stinking Bishop: this new English cheese is washed in perry made from the Stinking Bishop pear; the powerful aroma fully justifies its name.

observers sometimes make wrong guesses about how these skills are applied, like the speaker in a seventeenth-century comedy by Thomas Duffet, *The Amorous Old Woman*, in which an old woman is said to be 'as mellow as an Angelot cheese that has been mortified fifteen months in horse-dung'. They may well have smelt like that, as Stinking Bishop proudly does today, but, like Stinking Bishop, Angelot cheeses were fairly briefly matured and no doubt washed in cider or perry. No horse-dung. This year I was assured by two informants that the streaks in Gorgonzola and similar blue cheeses are produced by copper rods. Yes, they are pierced, but there's no verdigris; no copper rods. Attempting to set such urban legends aside, we will now explore the variables in the cheese-making process: they, and their infinite combinations, result in the astonishing variety of cheeses that we now see, smell and taste.

We begin at the beginning with the sources of milk. Although cheese was highly important to farmers and consumers,

authors from classical Greece and Rome are surprisingly reluctant to distinguish by flavour between the three obvious sources, the milk of sheep, goats and cows. The reason is that at this period producers generally mixed their milk. Sicilian was a mix of sheep's and goat's milk; Phrygian incorporated ass's and mare's milk with others; the best-known Apennine cheeses in Rome were all mixtures. This was the natural outcome of subsistence farming, in which, if one could, one grew a variety of crops, kept a variety of animals, and made money – if at all – by surpluses which would vary from year to year.

Medieval Arabic farming textbooks, which in general transmitted and exhanced Greek and Roman agricultural knowledge, have little to say about cheese, though they signal its importance indirectly by their emphasis on ensuring plentiful and wholesome milk. There is one significant observation, though, in the so-called *Andalusian Agriculture* written in southern Spain by Ibn al-'Awwām. After quoting a comment by Aristotle on the milk of sheep, goats and cows, the author adds a note that seems to be his own: 'More cow's milk than goat's milk is used for cheese-making, to the proportion of one-and-a-half to one.' This was evidently not the case in the classical or early medieval Mediterranean: if we can derive a general rule from earlier texts, sheep's milk was the most important by volume. And yet, while adjusting the proportions, Ibn al-'Awwām still speaks for the early consensus that one uses, and mixes, whatever milk one has. Curiously enough, in Spain this custom is still exemplified in the finest modern cheeses: among many other examples, the powerful blue, Cabrales, is a triumphant mixture of goat's, sheep's and cow's milk.

A different approach is evident in a traditional French rule of thumb quoted by the social historian Le Grand d'Aussy in the eighteenth century, *beurre de vache, fromage de brebis, caillé de*

chèvre: 'butter from cows, cheese from sheep, *caillé* [curds or cottage cheese] from goats'. This may seem surprising: in his time, as today, many of the greatest French cheeses were made from cow's milk. But then, the rule is not meant for gastronomes: the focus is on subsistence farmers. If they are to produce butter it must be from cow's milk; if they want fresh cheese there will be none better than from goat's milk; and that leaves sheep's milk, which makes very good cheese that matures well, sells profitably and can give such magnificent results as the *tommes de brebis* of the Pyrenees and the lip-tingling blue of Roquefort.

If single-milk cheeses are now the most widespread, and if cow's-milk cheese is now produced in greater volume than the others, the gradual change may well be seen as arising in the lowlands and modest mountains of middle Europe, from England in the west to Russia in the east. In this area cattle do well, and the much greater volume of milk that they produce may well have tipped the balance. Although Cheshire cheese is not recorded as such before the sixteenth century, its origins – a purely cow's-milk cheese and England's most venerable surviving example – might be traced by an indulgent historian to the twelfth, when the observant William of Malmesbury wrote in his *History of the Bishops of England* of the bishopric of Chester: 'The district is poor and inhospitable to spelt and wheat, but fertile in cattle and fish. The people enjoy their milk and butter, while the rich live on meat.' From this period onwards, in England itself and across the wide swathe of central Europe, most of the cheese, and the best of it, has been cow's-milk cheese. This is the tradition that was eventually transferred to the United States; in the modern Americas, again, most cheese is made from cow's milk.

The next question that arises is: what fraction of the milk will be turned into cheese? This is an easy question for most

subsistence farmers: their answer is likely to be all of it, having set aside a small quantity for immediate drinking as milk or for butter-making. In pre-modern conditions milk will not keep; nor will butter unless turned into ghee, a substance familiar in the ancient Near East and in modern India but seldom or never used in Europe.

The industrial revolution and the increase in government control of food production created havoc in this pastoral paradise. Both milk and butter could be stored for long periods and widely distributed; in ever more regions of the world farming became part of the money economy; the retail price of milk was often kept artificially high. If fresh milk and butter paid better, why devote the best of the milk to cheese? During the twentieth century such influences came near to ending the story of good-quality English cheese. Many regional types were actually forbidden during World War II, when cheese production was directed towards a standard low-quality version of Cheddar; some were never revived.

Butter-making: illustration from a Liebig card, *c.* 1912.

Many cheeses are made with less-than-whole milk, a practice whose origin must surely be traced to an original impulse to employ the milk as fully as possible, and to the usefulness and saleability of fresh milk and butter – to name no other possible products – alongside cheese. Parmesan, for example, is made with the skimmed milk of the evening milking, separated from the cream as it stands overnight, mixed with the whole milk of the next morning's milking.

Not far to the north-west, on the borders of Italy and Austria, can be found *formaggio grigio*, 'grey cheese': its name in German, *Graukäse*, is better known, and the Austrian 'grey cheese of Tyrol' has a protected appellation. It is made from buttermilk (the residue from the churning of butter) and

Brunost, 'brown cheese' (also known as *gjetost*), a Norwegian speciality with a remarkable caramelized flavour.

without rennet, relying on lactic acid to precipitate the curd; it is very low in fat, slowly matured, grey to grey-green in colour, with a powerful aroma.

Some cheeses are made entirely from the whey that separates as part of the process of making ordinary cheese. The best-known example is ricotta, whose name (along with its less-common French equivalent, *recuite*) says exactly how it originates: the whey is allowed to ferment a little and 're-cooked'. The cooking encourages further milk protein to separate out. Ricotta, a fresh whey cheese, has been known under this name for more than five hundred years: in 1475 Platina in *De honesta voluptate et valetudine* wrote of the 'slow re-heating' that encouraged the 'remaining richness to swim off', resulting in the product whose Latin name was *recocta*. It is one of a group of similar traditional products linked to the same geographical region: *xynomyzithra* in Crete, *sérac* (variously written) in Savoy, *brocotte* in parts of France, *brossat* in Catalonia, *requesón* in Spain (and *requesón* and *ricota* in Latin America); similar but not identical, because Corsican *brocciu* can be eaten fresh but can also be ripened for several months, as *brocciu passu*, and thus develops a drier texture and stronger flavour.

Whey cheeses can also take a quite different form. Norwegian *brunost* is made from whey very slowly simmered with some added cream. The result is a soft 'brown cheese' (as its usual name suggests), not unlike fudge. The same product in other Scandinavian countries is known as *mesost*, *myseost* and *mysuostur*, the last (Icelandic) version made with a little added sugar. All are caramelized and somewhat sweet. An alternative Norwegian name is *geitost* or *gjetost*, 'goat cheese', misleading because goat's milk is not invariably used.

Next is the question of rennet. The *Odyssey* was quoted above for its vignette of cheese-making. In the *Iliad* the healing

of a wound is compared to the effect 'when fig-sap rapidly coagulates the white milk, liquid at first but soon curdling as it is stirred'. Aristotle's *History of Animals* fills in a useful detail here: 'The fig sap is first squeezed out into wool. The wool is rinsed, and the rinsing is put into a little milk. This, mixed with other milk, curdles it.' Homeric scholars, taking the two early epics as a full picture of a primeval heroic society, have been known to deduce that fig sap was the most ancient rennet and that the Cyclops must therefore be imagined using it to curdle his milk.[5] This is on the wrong track: it is improbable that figs grew where cheese was first made, and the action of rennet is much more likely to have been discovered when an animal's stomach was used as a container for milk. However that may be, we know from this source that vegetable rennets were familiar at least 2,600 years ago. In most places, however, and for most forms of cheese, animal rennet has been the rule. Ancient sources variously recommend extracts from the stomachs of hares and chickens, but the implication is that kid's and lamb's rennet was used most often. As the emphasis in cheese-making gradually turned to cow's milk, so the choice of coagulant eventually favoured calf's rennet. This remained by far the most popular until recent technological developments, firstly with microbial rennets (*Rhizomucor miehei*, *Rhizomucor pusillus* and *Cryphonectria parasitica*), later with 'recombinant rennets' from friendly (and genetically modified) *Escherichia coli* bacteria.

Ancient authors, already quoted, suggest fig sap, safflower seed, the flower or choke of the cardoon and its cultivated descendant, the artichoke. The Roman pharmacologist, Dioscorides, added to the list the plant now known as lady's bedstraw, *Galium verum*, which was called *galion* in Greek 'because it curdles milk [*gala*] instead of rennet'. This was at one time used to curdle and colour Cheshire cheese,[6] and perhaps

also the forgotten English fresh cheese called *spermyse*. Pierandrea Matthioli, in his sixteenth-century commentary on Dioscorides, observes at this point that *galion* 'might easily be substituted for the plant we call *presura*, used to make sweet cheese [i.e., fresh cheese] throughout Tuscany'. This *presura* (literally 'rennet') was an alternative name for cardoon.

These ancient vegetable rennets are largely forgotten. Interesting as they used to be to observant Catholics and as they still could be to vegetarians, they are scarcely ever used nowadays in cheeses that reach a mass market. However, the Portuguese Nisa and the Spanish La Serena and Torta del Casar, three sheep's-milk cheeses, are curdled with cardoon. *Tyrozouli*, a young sheep's-milk cheese made in the mountains of western Crete, is sometimes curdled with fig sap.[7] There is at least one other exception. The carnivorous plants called butterwort and sundew in English, *Pinguicula vulgaris* and *Drosera* spp., are used to make a sour milk, not unlike yoghurt, known as

La Serena, a sheep's milk cheese from Extremadura in southwestern Spain. One of the rare truly vegetarian cheeses, curdled with cardoon flowers (*Cynara cardunculus*).

tätmjölk and *långmjölk* in Swedish and as *tjukkmjølk* in northern Norway: this unusual product is Norway's first protected geographical indication.

In the earliest Latin cheese-making instructions, likewise quoted above, Varro mentioned the use of vinegar to curdle the milk. Even in the ancient context this comes as no surprise. The Greek cookery author Paxamos, who probably worked in Roman Italy and whose writings were known to Varro, had already given a recipe for a fresh cheese or junket made in just this way. The method is still just as important: nowadays vinegar or lemon juice may be used in curdling the rare Cretan *tyrozouli* and the familiar Indian *panīr*. *Chhena*, the very fresh Oriya and Bengali variant of *panīr*, usually made from water buffalo's milk, is acid-curdled; so is the very mature Tyrolean *Graukäse* and the typically middle German *Handkäse* mentioned below.

The next variable to consider is the age of the cheese, beginning with the very earliest stage, at which the curd is still separating from the whey. The German quark, the French *fromage blanc* and *fromage frais* are actually sold with their whey while it is still draining; the porous inner container of cheese can be removed and the whey drunk from the outer container. That is a special development, but a healthy taste for whey has a long history. Samuel Pepys's diary records a stroll 'to the New Exchange, and there dranke our morning draught of whay'. As with ricotta so with Quark, similar very young cheeses or not-quite-cheeses are found under numerous names over a very wide area. Here I can only list them briefly and incompletely: *bonny clabber* in Ireland (a term of Irish origin: *bainne claba*, 'muddy or thick milk') and hence *clabber* in the southern United States, *thick milk* in Pennsylvania, *sour milk* in some other English-speaking areas, *Dickmilch* ('thick milk') in Germany, *surmjölk* ('sour milk') in Sweden, *leche agria* in Spain, *caillebotte*

Packing cottage cheese, San Angelo, Texas, 1939.

in France – and this is sometimes curdled with cardoon flowers or lady's bedstraw. Then the *skyr* 'curds' of Iceland, a mainstay of the medieval and modern diet. Then, perhaps slightly thicker, the *filmjölk* of Sweden, which again is close to Swedish *långmjölk* and Norwegian *tjukkmjølk* ('thick milk') mentioned above; then Caucasian *kefir*, a slightly alcoholic

fermented milk, traditionally made in a skin bag as the first cheese may well have been made. Ancestors or relatives of *kefir* are the *oxygala*, sour milk, and the more cheese-like *oxygalaktinos tyros*, yoghurt-cheese or sour-milk cheese, recommended in the second century AD by Galen: 'Of all cheese the youngest is the best, the kind that is made at home at Pergamon and in Mysia just to the north, called sour-milk cheese by local people, very pleasant-tasting, not harmful to the stomach, less indigestible and less difficult to excrete than any other cheese. Its humours are not bad nor particularly thick, which is the common fault of cheese. Very good, too, is the Vatusicus cheese preferred by the wealthy in Rome; there are other similar types elsewhere.' Galen's sour-milk cheese was identified by Thomas Muffett, perhaps rightly, with the 'ruen cheese' familiar in sixteenth-century England and now completely forgotten. Then again *caillade*, *caillée*, *claqueret* in France, *plattekees* in Belgium, *bibeleskaas* in Alsace, *cottage cheese* in England, *farmer cheese* and other names in the United

Packing Tilsiter cheese, *c.* 1935, Tilsit, East Prussia.

States; then the old *Mumpelkäse*, 'mouthful cheese', and the modern *Quargel* of Germany, *queso de Burgos* in Spain, *ravaggiuolo* (a very ancient type, with many spellings) in central Italy, *musulupu*, an Albanian speciality, in Calabria; *scacciata* in Sicily; *myzithra* in Greece.

We recall the French proverbial rule: butter from cows, cheese from sheep, *caillé* from goats. The last part of this is (so to speak) still in force. In places where people usually eat goat's-milk cheese – as in southern and western France, where the cheeseboard in a workaday restaurant will often offer nothing but goat's-milk cheeses – it is eaten fresh. The various goat's-milk cheeses of the Loire valley – the once-famous Touraine, the modern Valençay and Selles-sur-Cher – have always been at their best after very brief maturing; for about three weeks in the case of the two modern cheeses just named. *Recentes quam vetusti laudatiores*, 'the fresh are more deserving of praise than the old', said Champier of the goat's-milk cheeses of Bréhémont, which in his day were the best Touraine could offer. The exceptions – among them the powerful *Altenburger Ziegenkäse* from Germany, the occasional mature French *tomme de chèvre* and estimable *bleu de chèvre* – only prove that cheese generalizations never work.

Let us recall one more member of the family of very fresh cheeses, the English *green cheese* described by Daniel Defoe in 1725, made in Wiltshire and sold in London: 'a thin, and very soft cheese, resembling cream cheeses, only thicker, and very rich'. It was called green not from its colour but from its freshness, and this metaphor goes a long way back. In ancient Athens, in the late fifth century BC, every month on the day of the new moon was held a fair called simply *ho chloros tyros*, 'the Green Cheese'. We know this because of the advice, re-ported in a lawsuit, that if one were looking for a man from Plataiai one would be sure to find him at this fair.

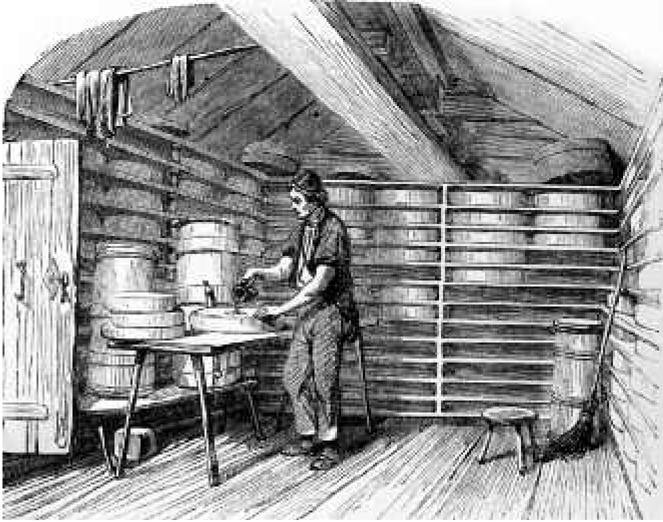
Plataiai was a small hill town a few miles north of Athens: therefore we also know that the economy of nominally independent Plataiai depended almost wholly on supplying fresh cheese to Athens. This is what big cities do to their neighbours. Ancient Rome liked its young Vestine cheese from the nearby central Apennines: the best was from the *campus Caedicius*, says Pliny. Nearly two thousand years later London and Bristol drew Wiltshire dairy farmers into producing green cheese to be dispatched in barges eastwards down the Thames and westwards down the Avon; and at the same moment Paris called on Viry, Vincennes and Montreuil for its fresh cream cheeses and on Neufchâtel and the Pays de Brie for fine cheese that required just a little longer to mature (ten days in the case of Neufchâtel).

The pressure in such cases was purely economic but no less irresistible. Fresh cheese in bulk is a 'cash crop' of no use locally; producers, once dependent on the money economy, cannot easily escape, because cheese for long maturing will require infrastructure that has fallen into disrepair. We have quoted Columella, writing his *On Agriculture* in Rome in the first century AD, on the careful maturing of cheese which could eventually even be exported. The corollary, as he goes on to say, was that cheese to be eaten within a few days 'is made in a simpler way; it is taken from the moulds, dipped in brine or rolled in salt, then briefly dried off in the sun'. This, or something like it, is the *caseus prosalsus* served among desserts at a restaurant, according to a dialogue in a Greek-Latin phrase book. Columella then describes a second style, *caseus manu pressus* 'hand-pressed cheese': 'When the milk is lightly set in the pails and still warming, the curd is broken up, boiling water is poured over it, and it is then either shaped by hand or pressed into boxwood moulds.' We happen to know from Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*

that this faux-rustique fashion was a favourite of the emperor Augustus himself: 'As regards food . . . he was very sparing, almost plebeian, with a liking for brown bread, whitebait, soft, spongy hand-pressed cheese, and green figs from a twice-bearing tree.' Although no direct line of descent can be traced, the same idea under almost the same name recurs in the modern German *Handkäse*, 'hand cheese', essentially a briefly matured *Quargel* that is (like its Roman forebear) ideally hand-formed, though in humdrum reality merely pressed into small moulds. Some are more briefly matured than others: *Harzer Handkäse* can be as hard and as powerfully flavoured as the most ancient of goat's-milk cheeses. In its various local forms *Handkäse* has a developed legend and a devoted following; often caraway-flavoured, and typically served in a bar with chopped onions as an accompaniment to cider, it will be called *Handkäse mit Musik*, the music (it is firmly said) being the flatulence that it is sure to cause.

By contrast, in pre-modern conditions extreme skill was needed in the making of any cheese that was destined for long maturing. The care taken over one detail, the temperature of the curd, at a period long before accurate measurement was possible, is clear from Champier's report, published in 1560 in *De re cibaria*, of the making of the *fourmes* that we now call Cantal:

> We had business at Allanches and were interested to see how the *fourmes* were made. We went up into the mountains and came upon a group of huts in which a large number of boys, no more than fourteen years of age, were engaged in cheese-making. Their arms were bare to the elbows, and they were pressing the cheese in the form with such dexterity and cleanliness that it could not



Gruyère in production in nineteenth-century Switzerland.

have been done better. Their master, who was with me, watched over them very minutely. He would not employ any who were slovenly or dirty, nor any with scabs or itches on their hands, nor even – this was remarkable – any whose hands felt rather warm: this, it was understood, would be the result of feverishness in the internal organs. We asked why he took such care. The only reason he could give was that with excessive warmth the cheese would not fully compress or cohere but would have numerous holes, and this would considerably reduce its value and its pleasure; it would have 'eyes', as people commonly say. The pleasure in them lasts for about four years; beyond that they are used as medicine against diseases and venoms, and against intestinal worms in children.

Early descriptions of the cheese-making process say little about the treatment of the curd, yet this is crucial to the durability of a cheese. Varying methods lead to great differences in the texture of the final product: Gruyère, Parmesan, Cantal and Cheddar are all good after eighteen months, after two years, and even considerably longer, but the teeth can distinguish one from another without the least difficulty. It is not true of all, though it may well be true of some, that 'if you will have a good cheese, and have'n old, you must turn'n seven times before he is cold'. The Somerset proverb (recorded in 1678) is a reminder of the special process, now known as cheddaring, which is essential to the firm and consistent texture of a good Cheddar. Very soon after setting the warm curd will have been cut into half-inch cubes, allowed to set again, then gently cooked and stirred for up to an hour, then drained. Then – and this is the cheddaring – slices of curd are cut, lightly stacked and, as the proverb instructs, turned and re-stacked frequently while they cool and their acidity increases. Afterwards the curd will be milled, salted and pressed.

Cheddaring, then, was already practised in some form in the seventeenth century. Another special treatment of the curd, whose effect is known by the Italian name of *pasta filata*, was likewise taken up long before modern times. Elsewhere, pulled-curd cheese is familiar (in the form of string cheese) in central Asia. It is well known in North America, where imitations or recreations of Italian cheese are popular, and the *asadero* and *quesillo Oaxaca* of Mexico resemble the Italian type. Yet pulled curd is truly an Italian speciality, beginning with the typical water buffalo cheeses, mozzarella and provatura, whose texture is for this reason difficult to describe (mozzarella is 'neither hard nor soft', says Osbert Burdett, carefully), and moving on to the cow's-milk cheeses from the south, typified by caciocavallo. This unusual form, with its

unusual name, can be traced back to the fourteenth century: already the pulled-curd cheese, as it hardened and matured, was hung from a beam, giving it the shape of cheese 'on horseback', if indeed this is the origin of the name; but this is not the image that usually suggests itself to those who describe caciocavallo. Burdett was reminded of the shape of a vegetable marrow; Giulio Landi was put in mind of an old woman's sagging breast. The philosopher Antonio Labriola recalled his teacher, a southerner, picturing the Platonic ideal world with the words *Figurateve tante casecavalle appise*, 'Imagine so many caciocavalli hanging in a row!'[8] Caciocavallo long ago extended its range from southern Italy to the Balkans: the word is familiar in every Balkan language, though in that region it is usually a sheep's-milk cheese. Romanians use the idiomatic phrase *a se întinde la cascaşval*, 'to lie down on the cheese', to describe one who behaves bumptiously or takes liberties; for the most striking image, however, we return to Italy, where *far la fine del caciocavallo*, to 'finish up like a caciocavallo', means to die by hanging.

Now come questions about the sophistications of what may be called pure cheese. Let's begin with blue, *persillé*, *erborinato* 'parsleyed, herbed' as the French and Italians misleadingly call it; 'this violent and aggressive family' of cheeses, to quote Piero Camporesi,[9] who singles out Gorgonzola and the less-known but more pungent blu del Moncenisio, a Savoyard cheese, as his examples. When was blue cheese first appreciated? Greek and Roman sources give us no hint: it seems no one fancied mouldy cheese in ancient times. Fortunately an early medieval biographer, Notker the Stammerer, answers the question precisely in the following anecdote:

> Charlemagne called unexpectedly on a bishop whose palace lay on his route. It was Friday, a day on which he

would not eat the meat of quadrupeds or birds, and fish could not be got without previous notice, so the bishop ordered an excellent cheese to be served to the Emperor, who . . . did not dream of embarrassing the bishop by asking for anything more. He took his knife, picked out the mould, which he regarded as inedible, and began to eat the white cheese. The bishop, who was at hand in case the Emperor wanted anything, stepped forward and said, 'Why do you do that, Lord Emperor? You are throwing away the best part.' Charlemagne . . . put a piece of the mould in his mouth, chewed it showly, and swallowed it as if it were butter . . . 'Good host,' he said, 'what you told me was true. Be sure to send me every year in Aix-la-Chapelle two cartloads of cheese just like this.'

Interested in the story only as revealing Charlemagne's character, Notker does not record the bishop's name or diocese.

Blue Vinny, a Dorset speciality, named for its dark blue-purple mould ('vinnow').

The publicists of Roquefort have no good reason for claiming this anecdote of around the year 800 as an early record of their cheese. What it is, in fact, is the first record of a category of cheeses that exists even now – cheeses that are sometimes, but unpredictably, affected by mould. This is demonstrated by the dénouement of the story. The bishop answered that he could never guarantee that the cheese sent to Aix-la-Chapelle would have the required special quality. 'Then cut them in two', replied Charlemagne, who had evidently had enough of the conversation; the bishop was to send to court only the cheeses that proved to contain mould.[10] In more recent times the French Bleu de Termignon and the English Cheshire are the best-known examples of unpredictably blue cheeses. In 1960, in *Cheeses of the World*, André Simon wrote, 'Blue Cheshire is not made: it happens. Blue Cheshire begins by being Red Cheshire until spores of *Penicillium glaucum* chance to get at it and are responsible for a blue marbling or veining which gradually spreads through the cheese.'[11]

A cheese that has always been known for its 'blueness' is Dorset Blue, better known as Blue Vinny, whose name tells its story. 'Vinny' means 'affected by vinnow' and, as an eighteenth-century writer carefully noted, there can be 'two sorts of vinnow on cheese, one in the nature of mouldiness, or long downy vinnow, not blue'. The long downy vinnow is the same fungal infection against which Cisley was warned in Thomas Tusser's verses.

As to cheese attacked by larger predators, by mites and maggots, the story appears to be shorter, but this is surely because the sources are inadequate. The first literary mention of mites is by Saint-Amant in his praise of Cantal in 1643 (already quoted). If confirmation is needed, it is provided by Giovan Cosimo Bonomo, who reminds us that mites are

51

EMBLEMATA.
VII.
Al te ſcherp maeckt ſchaerdigh.

Groot zondaer, groot verſtand: groot konſtenaer, groot boeve:
Geleert, zoo zeer verkeert; 't is een gemeyne proeve:
Het weelderighſte land het meeſte wied uyt-geeft:
Jae meeſt wat meeſt uyt-muyt, de meeſte feylen heeft.
Dit leert ons oock de kaes (hoe-wel de dertel-menſchen,
Door eē verdorven ſmaeck, naer't on-gedierte wenſchē)
De beſte die-men vind van maejen leeft en krielt.
Toont my de grootſte geeſt, 't is licht de grootſte fielt.

G 2 Wi-

Cheese complete with maggots: from J. de Brune, *Emblemata* (1624).

often described by the unwary as 'cheese dust – and they really believe that that is what it is',[12] at least, until they see the dust moving. Several modern cheeses are all the better for their mites: Mimolette Vieille, well-aged Cantal, Salers

Aged Milbenkäse, the tiny yellow 'crumbs' on the rind are the cheese mites.

and Laguiole, and most notably the German Milbenkäse – a cheese that was almost lost, fortunately revived, and permanently commemorated by the statue of a monstrous cheese mite at Würchwitz in Sachsen-Anhalt, where this remarkable cheese is made.

Daniel Defoe, in describing Stilton in 1725, had written of 'mites or maggots' to be eaten with a spoon; which of the two he really meant is not clear, since Stilton no longer contains either, but certainly Sardinian Casu Marzu is eaten complete with maggots, that is, the larvae of *Pyophila casei*; at least, it is eaten in this state when health inspectors are not looking. Cheese mites inhabit a grey area in European food regulation, but maggots are banned. Enthusiasts for Casu Marzu are advised to protect their eyes when eating: this creature is called 'cheese skipper' because it jumps.

The idea of adding flavouring to cheese is very old indeed: it goes back to the Sumerians, if the cuneiform wordlists have been correctly interpreted. In early Imperial Rome, Columella, as an adjunct to his cheese-making instructions, observes that 'whatever flavouring you choose' could be added to the curd or to fresh cheese; he gives crushed pine

nuts and thyme as two examples. Under the Roman Empire pepper and other eastern spices, in spite of their high cost as long-distance imports from India or beyond, became ever more popular in cuisine; sooner or later they were added to cheese, and the result found favour. A farming author of the fourth century, Palladius, therefore not only lifts a clause

The cheese mite memorial of Würchwitz contains samples of Milbenkäse that passersby can eat.

from Columella, but extends it: 'whatever flavouring you choose, whether pepper or any other spice'. In turn Palladius's brief instructions were copied almost without change into an early fourteenth-century farming handbook, *Liber Commodorum Ruralium* by Piero de' Crescenzi, who omitted the thyme and replaced it with a new alternative, 'at the curdling stage some people add cumin finely ground'. Thus the garlic of Gaperon, the pepper of Boursin, the anise of Géromé and the caraway of Leidsekaas have a longer ancestry than might be supposed. It is also many centuries since melilot was first added to Schäbzieger, a strange old cheese hard enough to grate into a green powder, already familiar to Johann Fischart, translator of Rabelais, in the sixteenth century. Incidentally, it is a hard name to spell. It is schapzuger to W. M. Thackeray, sapsago to modern Americans, schigres to the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, chapsigre to J.-K. Huysmans, whose description of a heavy elevenses in Amsterdam includes '*café au lait*, buttered sliced aniseed bread, Dutch cheese, and *chapsigre* ground to a green powder'.

Smoked cheeses, well known in Roman times, were prepared from cheese 'hardened off in brine and then darkened in the smoke of apple wood or of straw stubble', said Columella. Some were better than others: 'Cheese is not suited to every hearth or to every smoke, but the cheese that imbibes the smoke of Velabrum has the true flavour', wrote the poet Martial in his *Epigrams*. Velabrum was no Arcadia but a crowded, workaday quarter in the centre of old Rome. Pliny supports Martial, adding that the smoked cheese made in Gaul tasted of *medicamenta*, flavourings or additives. Things have, perhaps, not changed much. Today there are a few cheeses, such as the Italian *Scamorza affumicata*, for which smoking is a traditional practice; there are also widely marketed smoked cheeses that taste of *medicamenta*.

Weighing (and smoking) Gruyère: illustration from a Liebig card, *c.* 1912.

Flavour is added in other ways. One is the strip of spruce that is wrapped around a Mont d'Or as it matures. Another consists of the leaves of various trees on which cheeses mature or in which they are wrapped: plane-tree leaves for Olivet (they were walnut leaves, Emile Zola thought, but perhaps he was wrong); nettle leaves for Yarg; chestnut leaves for Banon, Bougon and many other little goat's-milk cheeses; sycamore leaves for Valdeón; sycamore leaves until recently for Cabrales, but this is no longer true, because, it seems, the local safety advisers think leaves are dirty. These practices are likely to be ancient (but their age cannot be verified) and they contribute, though indefinably, to the maturing of the cheese as well as its flavour.

Very old, certainly, is the washing of cheese in assorted nutrients, perhaps beginning with brine (a practice described in Roman texts) and wine (mentioned as a 'flavouring' in Akkadian texts). The washing or marinating takes different forms, and often acts chiefly on the rind. With some soft cheeses, however, it may fundamentally alter the flavour; even

more noticeably, sometimes, the aroma. Langres, Munster and Maroilles Gris are washed in brine, Troisvaux, Bergues and fromage de Herve in beer. At some medieval period eau-de-vie was tested and found good for this purpose: thus the odoriferous Epoisses has been perfected by the judicious application of *marc de Bourgogne*, while the powerful Hansi has bathed in *eau-de-vie de Gewürztraminer*. Several venerable cheeses – and some novelties like Mirabellois and Camembert au Calvados – benefit in the same way from alcoholic nourishment.

Finally, cheese may be enriched, as is the Butirro of southern Italy, which has a buttery centre and a *pasta filata* exterior: a surprise to the disapproving George Gissing, who reported in *By the Ionian Sea* (betraying some confusion) that 'the so-called butter, by a strange custom of Cotrone, was served in the emptied rind of half a spherical cheese – the small *caccio cavallo*, horse-cheese, which one sees everywhere'. Valentina Harris, in *Edible Italy*, was more open to adventure: 'The

Cabécou sur feuille. The chestnut leaf (*Castanea sativa*) aids ripening, contributing to flavour and texture.

amazing *butirro* has a hard, fibrous crust and a soft and buttery interior, fresh, creamy and tender.'[13] More often than with butter, cheese is enriched with cream. Home-made cream cheese, a very fresh cheese to which cream is added, has existed for centuries; Scotland has its *crowdy*, described as 'half butter and half cheese' or (by Louis MacNeice) as a kind of 'crumbly cream cheese, pure white and with practically no taste'; 'sharp thick cream-cheese' and 'slip-coat cheese' were mentioned by Kenelm Digby in the mid-seventeenth century. Such cream cheeses were often sweetened with sugar; other flavours might be added, as in the frothy confections that Grimod de la Reynière called *fromages à la crème*, 'perhaps whipped with vanilla or rosewater, perhaps half-iced and folded with pistachios or orange-water, the kind of thing that

Maturing Tilsiter cheese, *c.* 1935, Tilsit, East Prussia.

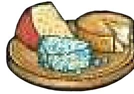
Paul-Louis Martin ('Martin des Amoignes'), *La Revenderie*, 1898.

Mme Lambert, the finest crémière of Paris, knows so well how to make': Grimod's writings, like those of Martial long before, were often commercially inspired.

By the eighteenth century commercial cream cheeses of some early kind were being sold at Viry on the edge of Paris; at that stage they were not so very different from the soft, fresh cheeses of Normandy perennially aimed at the Paris

market, the little hearts and discs and *bondons*, the Neufchâtels (familiar by 1808, and more odoriferous then than they are now), children of the Gournays, grandchildren of the Angelots. From this point, enrichment has continued. Petit-Suisse was a new, creamy kind of *bondon*, invented around 1850 and said to be named in honour of a Swiss dairyman at Villers-sur-Auchy. It was followed by the once-familiar Monsieur Fromage and triple cream cheese we now know as Brillat-Savarin (it was named after the famous gastronome when rebranded in the 1930s). The newer, cheaper versions, insistently marketed to children and families, are spreading ever more rapidly. Beyond the borders of France, Rahmkäse, Philadelphia cheese, Gräddost and the lost Cambridge and Cottenham cream cheeses of England are all examples of further variations on this long-lasting and highly remunerative experiment; so is the admired Mascarpone, once described as a 'kind of Petit Suisse'.[14]

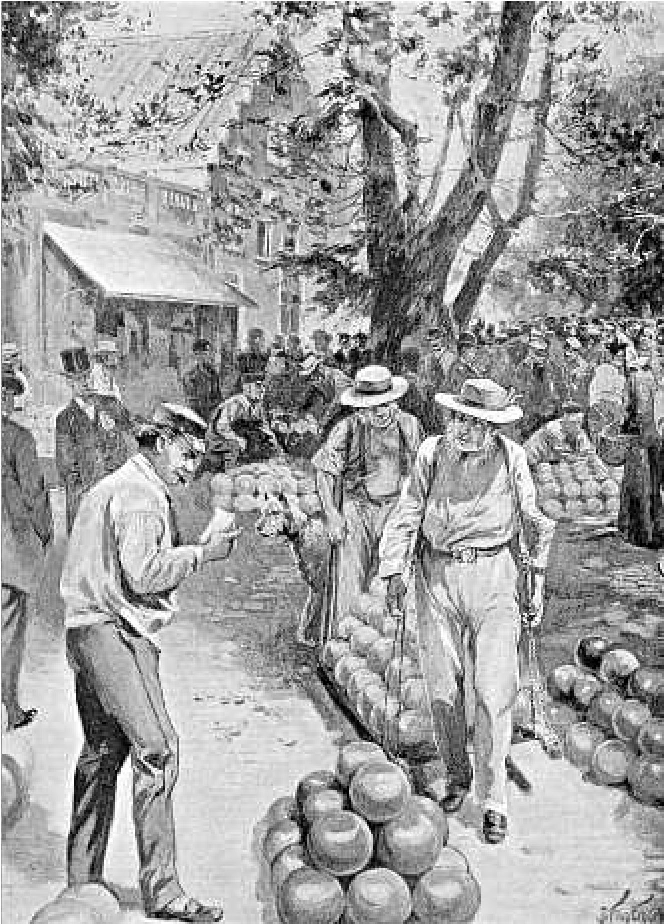
4
Consuming



Cheese Traded

Cheese came before trade. A valuable and transferable food source, more easily transported than wine or olive oil, it may well have been one of the commodities with which trade began. Ever since that date, whenever it was, cheese has saved its producers from starvation not only because they could eat it but because they could exchange it for other essential commodities.

The distance over which cheese travelled increased gradually. That very first piece of direct evidence, the 'northern cheese and southern cheese' in a tomb in Egypt, represented power over two kingdoms and the possibility of transporting goods between them. There was no cheese trade that we know of between ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia or between the Hittites and the Mycenaeans; but cheese was a standard commodity in army rations (we recall the 'aged soldier cheese' of the Hittite records) and travelled at least as far as the armies did. In any case, longer distances were to follow in due course. Sicilian cheese went to Athens; Gallic, Alpine, Illyrian and Greek cheeses were familiar in Rome. By around 1600 we know that Parmesan was going north to London and east



The cheese market at Edam: engraving from *The Sphere*, 1901.

(in Venetian ships) to Constantinople; we know that Swiss, German, French and English cheeses were all travelling substantial distances beyond those countries' borders. On the long sea voyages of the age of exploration cheese was among the most reliable of stores, and in this way reached new continents.

In the pre-modern period, however, the commonest journey was probably from summer pastures in the high mountains, or from winter pastures in the valleys, to whatever neighbouring towns and cities offered a market. It was the coming of railway and steamer transport that made possible the widespread distribution of favourite and prestigious cheeses – especially relatively fresh cheeses – to a larger potential market. Wiltshire green cheese reached London by barge, but it was with the railways that Camembert cheese became popular in Paris. By the end of the nineteenth century European cheeses were exported in large quantity to the Americas.

There they competed for the first time on an almost equal basis with their imitations. The imitations, too, were available for export, with perhaps unexpected results. Britons found that they preferred American or Canadian Cheddar. It was possible to pit one Roquefort against another: 'The best imitation is the cheese sold under the name of Danish Roquefort', Burdett decided.

Until the global distribution of cheese became a reality, this question of names had been largely overlooked. If Cheddars, Parmesans and Roqueforts, on sale in distant continents, had been produced locally and not in the real places whose names they bore, it did not matter. There was clearly a demand for cheese in those styles; local makers filled the demand as best they could. Buyers might or might not know the truth, but they could only become concerned about actual differences of quality after travelling to Europe or after paying a very high price for an imported product. As imports grew in volume, and overseas markets became important to producers, it began to matter that they were competing with local products trading under what began to look like false names. The problem has proved easier to identify than to solve, with the results that we now see. Most geographical

George Tsioros at his Olympic Cheese Mart, St Lawrence Market, Toronto, 2004.

KAFALOGRAVIERA
KASSERI
SAGANAKI
MANOURI
MYZITHRA
FETA
BULGARIAN KASHKAVAL
ENGLISH CHEESE
SPECIAL
GERMAN CAMBOZOLA
BAVARIAN BABY BLUE
CASTELLO BLUE
SAGA BLUE
ST AGUR BLUE
DANISH ESROM
SMOKED ESROM
GERMAN TILSITER
LIGHT
SKIM
DANBO
LIGHT
GOUDA
LIGHT
HAVARTI
BLUE
SPECIAL

names protected in Europe are not protected on other continents; some names are differently defined in different territories (as with Gruyère in Switzerland and France); sometimes simple and obvious names lack the protection that buyers might expect (as with Brie, Cheddar and Parmesan). The protected names come with certain guarantees of origin or quality, but they are not always guaranteeing what the buyer thought (as with Limburger and Tilsiter, which can be made anywhere). Many names that might appear to have equal status with the protected ones turn out to be undefined (as with Coulommiers and Cheshire) and commercially owned (as with Saint-Agur and Bleu de Bresse).

Cheese Cooked

Little has been said so far of the fact that cheese is more than a simple food; it is also a culinary ingredient, and has been so at least since its appearance in 'the oldest cookbook in the world', the Akkadian cuneiform tablet (now at Yale University) whose recipe for stewed kid incorporates cheese as a flavouring.

In ancient Greek cuisine, likewise, cheese was used in savoury dishes – as shown by an early Athenian comedy in which a fictional *nouvelle* cook of about 300 BC announces, with a nod to current culinary gurus, that cheese has become an old-fashioned flavouring: 'These men have wiped out the old hackneyed seasonings from the books, and made the pestle and mortar disappear from our midst; I mean cumin, vinegar, silphium, cheese, coriander, the seasonings that Kronos used.'[1] A little earlier Archestratos, the gastronomic poet of Greek Sicily, while dismissing cheese as an ingredient with delicate fish, recommended it for coarse-fleshed fish:

Bleu d'Auvergne; there is too much of this in the world, and not enough Bleu de Gex.

'When Orion is setting in the sky and the mother of the grape-clusters sheds her ringlets, then take a baked sarg well sprinkled with cheese, good-sized, hot, slashed with sour vinegar because it is naturally coarse. Remember this, and treat everything in the nature of tough fish similarly.' When not bowing to culinary fashion the Greeks used cheese in sauces for meat ('*Hyposphagma* for roast meat: the blood to be blended with honey, cheese, salt, cumin, silphium – these heated together') and vegetables; cheese was among the ingredients in *thria*, the ancient version of the modern *dolmades*. Classical Rome, too, made good use of cheese in savoury cuisine, as can be seen from the recipe book *Apicius*. The limited evidence suggests that cheese was even more common in ancient breads, cakes and sweets. It was sometimes added to bread dough before baking; other uses range from cheese-and-sesame

sweetmeats deep-fried and rolled in sesame seeds, served at a lavish poetic banquet of around 350 BC, by way of the pancakes known as *staititas* ('the wet batter is poured on to a frying pan, and honey and sesame and cheese are added') to the very complicated so-called cheesecake, *placenta*, for which a painstaking recipe is given in the early Roman farming manual by Cato. He calls for sheep's-milk cheese that is fresh and not acid.

Cheese found fewer uses in medieval cuisine: this may reflect the growing ambivalence about its dietary qualities. But it does occur in medieval cookery texts. Arab cookbooks sometimes specify Sicilian cheese.[2] They do not say why, but having travelled some distance, slowly, from Sicily, and having been prepared for this journey, it will have been a mature and hard cheese, perhaps a grating cheese. European medieval recipes sometimes call for 'fresh' or 'dry' cheese, for sheep's or goat's-milk cheese, but they do not specify geographical origins. The one exception to this rule is not a cookbook, though it offers a detailed recipe: it is a satirical poem by a Byzantine monk, describing a remarkable *monokythron*, a one-pot dish, served in a refectory, that incorporates two or three kinds of cheese and much else:

> Then comes in a nice *monokythron*, slightly blackened on the top, preceded by its aroma. If you like I'll tell you all about this *monokythron*. Four hearts of cabbage, fat and snowy white; a salted neck of swordfish; a middle cut of carp; about twenty *glaukoi* [unidentified small fish]; a slice of salt sturgeon; fourteen eggs and some Cretan cheese and four *apotyra* [possibly *anthotyra*, little new cheeses; possibly something else] and a bit of Vlach cheese and a pint of olive oil, a handful of pepper, twelve little heads of garlic and fifteen chub mackerels,

and a splash of sweet wine over the top, and roll up your sleeves and get to work – just watch the mouthfuls go.[3]

How realistic this may be we cannot tell, but it suggests a well-developed trade in cheese in the Byzantine Empire of the twelfth century, with Vlach cheese (produced by transhumant shepherds in the Balkans) making a creative contrast with Cretan cheese, probably matured and stored in brine like modern Feta; that is just the kind of cheese other sources attribute to medieval Crete.

Cheese made and enjoyed, from the medieval health manual *Tacuinum Sanitatis*.

With the coming of the Renaissance cookbooks and food writing became more detailed and reflective, and specific cheeses are often wanted. We remember Master Chiquart's insistence on 'the very best Craponne cheese, or Brie cheese, or the very best cheese that can be had'. More recent cookbooks run the gamut, from a simple call for cottage cheese or Cheddar to a meticulous insistence, equal to Chiquart's, on obscure and expensive varieties.

Cheese Served

> The roses and the chickpeas are are their best now, Sosylus, and so are the young cabbage stalks, and the anchovies, and the new cheese sprinkled with salt, and the baby leaves of curly lettuce; but we are not out on the beach or up at the belvedere . . . [4]

Let us return to cheese in its own right, served and eaten in its original state. Cheese with bread and green vegetables, alongside wine or some other chosen drink, makes a good lunch, but we may well want to add another strong flavour. It could be the anchovies suggested here in a Greek epigram by Philodemos (the philosopher whose manuscripts, buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, were recovered from the ruins of Herculaneum). It could be olives, and the lunch might conclude not with roasted chickpeas but figs and nuts, as suggested in a school dialogue about a century later: 'I have white bread, olives, cheese, dried figs, nuts, I drink cold water. Having lunched, I go back to school again.'[5] In the same source a supper-time snack is assembled from similar ingredients with charcuterie added: bread, cheese, olives, sliced cow's udder, cakes, wine.

Floris van Dijck, *Laid Table with Cheese and Fruit*, *c*. 1615.

Joseph Plepp, *Still-life*, 1632.

In a vegetarian world a similar menu (without the charcuterie) might provide the main meal of the day. So, at least, Plato suggested in his *Republic*, in which Socrates sketches the lifestyle of an ideal city:

> 'To nourish themselves they will prepare pearl barley and wheat flour; baking the one, kneading the other, turning their fine cakes and loaves on to some reeds or clean leaves, and reclining on mats of bryony and myrtle, they and their children will entertain themselves and drink wine and wear wreaths and sing songs of praise to the gods . . .'
>
> 'You seem to have your men dining without any relish,' said Antisthenes.
>
> 'True,' I replied. 'I was forgetting; but of course they shall have relish as well, pickles and olives and cheese and bulbs, and naturally they will boil pot-herbs as is done in the country. We will serve them some sort of dessert, too, with figs and chickpeas and beans, and they can roast myrtle-berries and beech-nuts before the fire while sipping their wine.'

The dialogue plays on the ambiguity of 'relish', which usually meant a meat or fish dish to eat alongside bread, the centrepiece of a full meal; in Socrates' vegetarian diet, cheese plays this central role.

Vegetarianism aside, cheese played the same role often enough in medieval Iceland (the meal consisted of *skyr ok ost*, 'curds and cheese', *Eyrbyggja saga* tells us) though when Icelanders visited wealthy Norway and were given the same, they took it as an insult (so we gather from *Egils saga*). Yet even at times and places where food is more varied, cheese has regularly served as the centrepiece of a meal – from

macaroni cheese to the fashionable *fondue* and the even more fashionable *raclette*; in modern England, Lancashire cheese is praised as ideal for toasting. These styles are older than may be thought. Certain cheeses of eastern France were best when 'roasted', according to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources. Much older still, and in the same region, Anthimus, author of *On the Observance of Foods* and Byzantine doctor in exile at a Frankish court, forbids this among several other Gallic gourmandises that must already have been current in his time: 'Anyone who eats roasted or fried cheese needs no other poison! When the fat has been melted out, the result is pure stones', stones that were destined, in Anthimus's belief, to lodge in the kidneys.

Yet in big, meaty meals cheese appears relatively rarely among the main dishes. Sometimes – maybe fried or grilled – it will occur among the starters, like the warm goat's-milk cheese served with walnuts and green salad in not a few French restaurants, or the feta served with lettuce, burning raw onion slices, and good and generous olive oil in practically

'Bachelor's fare: bread and cheese and kisses.' Jonathan Swift's words are illustrated in a 1787 print attributed to William Dent.

every Greek restaurant. This idea has an ancient history, as shown by a brief fragment of Athenian comedy. There is a new-born child: why no party? 'Why is there no wreath in front of the door? Why does no smell of cooking strike the tip of my exploring nose? . . . The custom on this occasion is to bake slices of Chersonese cheese, to fry cabbage gleaming with oil, to stew some fat mutton chops . . . and to drink many a warming cup', says a puzzled speaker.[6]

Sometimes cheese appears among savouries towards the end of the main course. Most often its time comes later: 'cheese is eaten among desserts', wrote Platina uncompromisingly in 1475. Earlier evidence on cheese as dessert includes a very ancient depiction of a meal that turns into a drinking party, by the Greek poet Xenophanes:

> And now the floor is clean, and the hands of all, and the cups; one distributes woven wreaths, another offers round sweet-smelling perfume in a jug. The mixing bowl stands full of cheer; another wine, ready in jars and promising never to give way, has the mild smell of flowers. Among [us] incense gives a holy scent; there is water, cold and sweet and clean. Yellow loaves are set out, and a generous table loaded with cheese and rich honey. An altar in the middle is heaped with flowers; song and dance and festival fill the halls . . .[7]

Here, then, the cheese is to be eaten with honey, a very good idea: a cheese that was kept in brine, once it has been washed, is likely to be good with honey. In a heavy Roman meal described by a vulgar speaker in Petronius's *Satyricon*, in which fresh cheese is among savouries ending the main course, grape syrup (not honey) is poured over it; Petronius disliked this innovation, I suspect, but it might work with

Georg Flegel, *Still life with Cheese and Cherries*, 1635.

an unsalted fresh cheese. Nowadays cheese may appear before the sweets (as the French serve it today) or after them (as the British do), but in a deeper sense it is all the same. To be brief,

> *Il ne feut oncques tel mariage*
> *Qu'est de la poire et du fromaige,*

'There was never such a match as the marriage of pears and cheese,' so the French proverb had it,[8] and cheese and fruit are served together at dessert in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Cheese is a venerable dessert, then, but the cheeseboard is a novelty, one of the splendid innovations of the twentieth century, an outgrowth of the modern global trade in cheese.[9] At older periods even a wealthy host could hardly expect to have five or six different cheeses, all at peak condition, to serve

to guests; thus, in records of meals from earlier periods, if cheeses are named at all the suggestion will be for the one that is sure to be in season when the meal takes place. So it is in the day-by-day and month-by-month menus in book four of Bartolomeo Scappi's *Opera*: changes were rung between half a dozen favourite cheeses of the sixteenth-century Vatican, but never more than two at a single banquet, with

Healthy food poster, United States, *c.* 1942.

the exception of the glorious 25 April, on which Maiorichino, Raviggioli Fiorentini and chunks of Parmesan appeared together on the table.

Cheese Digested

The anonymous author of *Ancient Medicine* (attributed to Hippokrates) is a good deal more sensible than most of his successors: 'We must not simply say, "Cheese is a bad food." Cheese does not harm every person alike. Some can eat their fill of it without the slightest ill effect. Indeed, those with whom it agrees are remarkably strengthened by it.' The treatise *Regimen*, in the same Hippocratic collection, gives what appears to be an entirely positive evaluation: 'cheese is strong, heating, nourishing, settling'; but, paradoxically, in traditional medicine these strong positives were sufficient to condemn cheese as an ingredient in most people's diet. Such a powerful food, especially since it was agreed to be 'difficult to excrete', would unbalance the constitution. Wise doctors advised against it. Wise patients ignored them.

The first Roman who wrote on the subject was Varro, author of a dialogue on farming. 'Cow's-milk cheese has most food value and is most difficult to pass; sheep's-milk cheese is intermediate; goat's-milk cheese has least food value and is most easily excreted. There is also the distinction between soft, fresh cheeses and dry, old cheeses; the fresh are easier to assimilate and do not lodge in the body, the mature have opposite qualities.' Later medical writers were, if anything, more admonitory about cheese than their predecessors. Galen and Oribasius, Greek authors prominent under the Roman Empire, are explicit on the dangers of this powerful nutrient. They do, however, follow Varro on one important point.

Young, fresh cheeses were allowed in humoral theory to be neither heating nor putrescent; they were easier to 'assimilate', easier on the digestion: they could therefore be recommended. But in moderation: for those who took too much cheese, even the relatively fresh Vatusicus that only the richest Romans could afford, danger awaited. In the year 161 the emperor Antoninus Pius, after eating Alpine cheese too greedily at a dinner, was sick in the night, never recovered, and died three days later.[10]

The medicine of the ancient world is conveniently distilled, in execrable style, by Anthimus in *On the Observance of Foods* at the beginning of the medieval period: 'Cheese, what they tell me, lies heavy: sick and healthy alike, especially hepatics and kidney problems and splenetics, because it congeals in the kidneys and stones develop. Cheese that is fresh and sweet, i.e. not salted, is suited to the healthy. Also, if totally fresh it is good to dip in honey.' The classic late medieval diet book, much read and much commented on, is *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*, a Latin poem supposedly addressed by the whole medical faculty of Salerno to an unnamed king of England. In accordance with tradition it reminds its royal reader at the outset that cheese is 'melancholic' and harmful to invalids, though 'baby cheese' (fresh cheese) is nourishing. Later comes a section devoted entirely to cheese, and this is more nuanced:

> Cheese is cold, constipating, coarse and hard.
> Cheese and bread is a good meal for the healthy:
> Those who are unhealthy should take the bread only.
> Ignorant doctors tell me that cheese causes harm
> But they do not know why this harm is acceptable:
> Cheese assists the exhausted stomach
> If, when it has been eaten, the meal ends.
> Those with knowledge of science bear witness to this.

In other words, ‘after cheese comes nothing’, as the English have said since the seventeenth century; because the Renaissance, for all its effect on scientific knowledge, produced little change in dietary advice. Thomas Muffett in *Health's Improvement* (1604) is able to show his learning by citing Galen and the medieval Jewish dietician Isaac Israeli, but the result is very much the same: ‘Old and dry cheese hurteth dangerously: for it stayeth siege [defecation], stoppeth the liver, engendereth choler, melancholy, and the stone, lieth long in the stomack undigested, procureth thirst, maketh a stinking breath and a scurvy skin. Whereupon Galen and Isaac have well noted, that as we may feed liberally of ruen cheese, and more liberally of fresh cheese, so we are not to taste any further of old and hard cheese then to close up the mouth of our stomacks after meat.’

Kreuzkäse: cheese stamped with a cross, traditionally made at Kloster Heilig Kreuz, Donauwörth, Bavaria. Woodcut from the herbal medicine manual *Hortus Sanitatis* (1491).

The idea that mature cheese can serve as a digestive, but only if taken at the end of the meal, is as influential as ever today: like it or not, this is why we eat cheese as a dessert (while admitting fresh goat's-milk cheese as a starter). Our brief survey of cheese in the diet books has failed to show how old this particular idea is. It began, in fact, not in the realm of food-and-diet but in that of medicine-and-drugs. Sixteen hundred years ago a physician from Bordeaux, Marcellus, prescribed for patients with colic a dose of 'very old sheep's-milk cheese' (perhaps just such a cheese as a well-made modern *Tomme des Pyrénées*) 'taken with the meal, or shaved and drunk with wine' (perhaps just such a potion as Hecamede prepared for Nestor). Four hundred years before Marcellus, when Columella gave a prescription for a digestive, he already included cheese among other very strong and 'medicinal' flavours (see p. 131).

The idea that cheese is bad for you has had a long innings. One feels sympathy for those medical men and quacks who have bravely proclaimed that cheese is good for you. In their number was Joseph Knirim, a New York barman who by the early 1920s had turned his bar into the briefly famous Pilsener Sanatorium.[11] There, to the health of his fellow citizens and to his own profit, he served not-too-cold Pilsner beer and good Camembert cheese. On the proceeds he retired, travelled to Europe, satisfied himself as to the origins of Pilsener, and visited Camembert, where he succeeded in restoring from oblivion the name of Marie Harel. For historically insecure reasons,[12] she has ever afterwards been honoured as the 'inventor of Camembert' (which was, whoever developed it, an extremely successful adaptation of the Brie method to a smaller cheese); in 1928, soon after Knirim's death, no less a figure than the President of France officiated at the unveiling of her memorial.

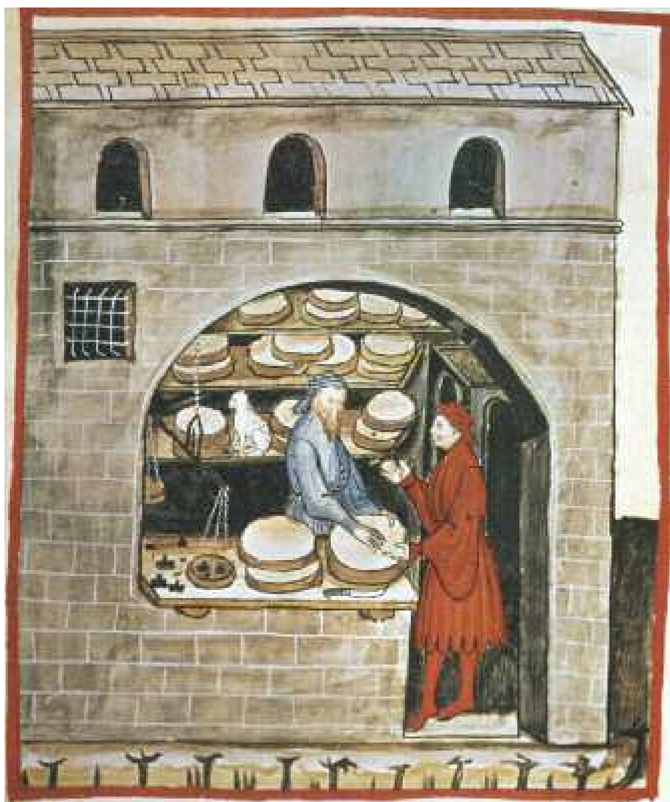
Crottin de Chavignol on sale at the market in Chartres.

Cheese, or its human consumers, have a weakness for the proverbial mode. Johann Fischart, typically unsatisfied with the one caseous proverb – the Gallic marriage of cheese and pears – that Rabelais had included in his Five Books, added two more to his extended German translation in *Affentheurlich naupengeheurliche Geschichtklitterung* (1575):

> *Caseus und caepe, die kommen ad prandia saepe:* — *und*
> *Caseus und panis sind köstliche fercula sanis.*

The second of these ('Cheese and bread are valuable foods for the healthy') is a macaronic version of a line from the

Brie de Nangis? Antoine Vollon, *Still life with Cheese*, late 1870s.



'Old cheese', 14th-century illumination from the so-called 'Hausbuch der Cerruti', a manuscript of the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*.

Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum just quoted above. The first is another marriage, not at all Gallic ('Cheese and onion often come to lunch') because it seems to betray the fact that a very odoriferous breakfast delicacy, *Handkäse mit Musik*, was already part of the atmosphere of Germany four hundred years ago. Meanwhile the English cheese marriage was financially based: 'Cheese and money should always sleep together one night.' Early Greeks were aware that cheese

and bread are financially unmatched: 'The beggar had no bread and yet bought cheese!' was a proverbial comment on the wasting of limited resources. But Italians are happy to match cheese with bread (*esser pane e cacio*, be bread-and-cheese, be hand in glove) or with pasta (*cascare come il cacio sui maccheroni*, fall like cheese on macaroni, make the finishing touch) as in the couplet from Pulci's *Morgante*:

> *Grattugia con grattugia non guadagna,*
> *Altro cacio bisogna a tal lasagna,*

'A grater won't grate a grater; this lasagna wants a different cheese.'

In Portuguese, Spanish and Hindi, cheese has been a prize that may be deceptive (*dársela con queso a alguien*, give it to someone with cheese, lead him into a trap; *me la dio con queso*, he gave it me with cheese, he tricked me; *panīr catānā*, give someone a lick of the cheese, flatter him for one's own reasons; *panīr jamānā*, set it in the cheese, slip something into the conversation). In Romanian, likewise, it was food for the unwary (*cu caş la gură*, with the cheese still in his mouth, a fledgling).

In French, cheese is a metaphor for excess (*en faire tout un fromage*, make a whole cheese of it, make a meal of it, go to town); in German it can be everyday and boring (*Grumbeerschnitz un weißer Kees, alle Daach desselb' Gfrees*, 'potato soup and white cheese, everyone eats the same'); in Italian it is an object-lesson in parsimony (*Fare del cacio barca e del pan Bartolommeo* means 'make the cheese into a boat and the bread into Bartholomew', leave the rinds and crusts, eat wastefully: of Bartholomew, flayed alive according to legend, nothing was left but the skin.)

And in more than one language cheese has provided similes for feminine beauty. In ancient Greek poetry the Cyclops

– a rustic cheese-maker and hopelessly in love – compared the pale skin of the nymph Galatea to the whiteness of fresh cheese. In Roman comedy a lover addresses an interminable list of endearments to his beloved: the list climaxes with 'my honey, my heart, my colostrum, my little soft cheese!' And in modern Sicily a shapely young woman may be characterized by admirers as *culu-ri-tumma*, 'with a backside as shapely as a cheese'.

In the literary discourse of cheese the landmark year is 1477. At this date (less than thirty years after the introduction of printing to Europe) Pantaleone da Confienza, physician to the duke of Savoy, published his wholly original survey of European cheeses and cheese-making. He called it *Summa Lacticiniorum* or 'Outline of Milk Products', a title that alluded to venerable works such as the vast *Summa Theologiae* or 'Outline of Theology' of Thomas Aquinas. In giving his book this deliberately grandiose title, Pantaleone asserted that it, too, was definitive in its limited field. *Summa Lacticiniorum* opens with a general section discussing the nature of milk and the range of products made from it, especially cheese; it outlines the variety of cheeses, relating them to the seasons, the climate, the origin of the milk and the methods of making and maturing. In part two Pantaleone surveys the regional and local cheeses known to him, beginning with his own native northern Italy, from the *marzolino* of Tuscany to the many excellent cheeses of Savoy. He continues his cheese itinerary through Savoie and across France, noting the preeminence of the cheese of Brie and of the goat's-milk cheeses of Poitou. He thinks little of German cheese, but considers the English ones that he had seen on sale at Antwerp equal in quality to the best Italian kinds.

There is nothing earlier; this was the first of a series of more or less literary works wholly dedicated to cheese. Sixty years later appeared a whimsical book entitled *Formaggiata di*

Sere Stentato: this so-called 'Cheesery', attributed to an imaginary Sere Stentato but written by Giulio Landi, member of a society of gastronomes in Piacenza, took up the defence of cheese – and in particular the wonderful hard cheeses of the Po valley – against all kinds of detractors, using arguments sometimes so scurrilous or indecent that they were deleted from later editions by the censor. The first poem devoted to cheese, in Italian in 1557, was by Ercole Bentivoglio: he firmly asserted the nutritional benefits of cheese, claiming it as an aphrodisiac. The next are those of Saint-Amant, lyrical lover of Cantal and Brie. A long time later – around 1900 – the Belgian poet Thomas Braun included a poem in praise of cheese in his *Livre des Bénédictions*, 'Book of Blessings'. Meanwhile, the nineteenth century had seen the development of a technical literature about cheese; among the earliest substantial texts were Josiah Twamley's *Dairying Exemplified*, published on both sides of the Atlantic just before 1800, and William W. Townsend's *Dairyman's Manual*, which appeared in New England in 1839.[13] Books for the apprentice gastronome – the world of cheese, how to choose it, how to serve it – were popular by the 1930s. Books on cooking with cheese begin in the early 1940s. Cheese fiction – a rather specialized genre – existed by the mid-1970s, and occasional histories of specific cheeses have appeared, some more serious than others. The science and, let us say, pathology of cheese were topics of specialized books throughout the twentieth century, with a few dated even earlier.[14]

Far beyond the reach of this specialized literature, the mere whisper of cheese suggests overwhelming tastes and smells. The odour of the title character in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, Jon Scieszka's children's book of 1992, may or may not equal the aroma surrounding the hero of Garrison Keillor's verse tale of 1996, *The Old*

Man Who Loved Cheese, described as an all-too-faithful habitué of Easy Ed's Used Cheese Market:

> The smell was so awful, so sour and vile
> The skunks had to go and lie down for a while.

The name of any well-known cheese evokes cultural allusions. Parmesan? One remembers the wise Doctor Livesey in *Treasure Island*: 'In my snuff-box I carry a piece of Parmesan cheese – a cheese made in Italy, very nutritious.' Swiss cheese? Full of eyes, as everyone knows, hence Heath Robinson's diagram of the 'doubling of Gloucester cheese by the Gruyère method'; hence Obelix's complaint, when given a vast disc of Gruyère as his rations in *Astérix en Suisse*, that he is eating holes. The Swiss fondue orgy, with its vast cauldron, its painful forfeits for any who drop their bits of bread in, and its Roman diners gradually covered with adhesive strings of molten cheese (to the disgust of their fastidious Swiss hosts), is an unforgettable leitmotiv of this Asterix adventure. As for Dutch

Separation of curds and whey: Parmesan cheese, Parma, 2004.

cheese, it was a Dutch cheese that served as a peaceful retreat in one of La Fontaine's *Fables*:

> *Un certain rat, las des soins d'ici-bas,*
> *Dans un fromage d'Hollande*
> *Se retira loin du tracas.*

'A certain rat, tired of the labours of this world, found a quiet retirement home in a *fromage d'Hollande*.' And 'green cheese'? As we have seen, 'green' is not a colour term in this case: in older English, fresh or cottage cheese is green cheese. The phrase unavoidably reminds us of the proverbial misconception, proverbial only for the fact that no one would ever really believe it: 'They would make men believe that the moon is made of green cheese!' 'You might as soon persuade some country peasants that the moon is made of green cheese . . .'[15] Which in turn recalls occasional articles by astronomers, usually published on 1 April, claiming that it is true after all; and some, at least, will immediately remember Graham Oakley's *The Church Mice and the Moon* (1974) in which the scientists of the Wortlethorpe Municipal Moon Programme triumphantly observe mice at work on the moon, thus finally proving its edibility.

Cheese in literature may be an everyday product or an object of special value. Here the Cyclops episode in Homer's *Odyssey* is the place to begin. Cheese-making is the daily activity of the savage Cyclops, very much as it might be of a nomadic pastoralist in the northern Greek mountains; the poet is quite at home with the cheese business, and the only question that presents itself to Odysseus and his men is whether or not to steal the cheese. Having decided not to do that, they sit down and eat some of it. This is far from the ambience of heroic legend in which the *Odyssey* is ostensibly set;

it is a scene of everyday life, which, on the Cyclops' sudden arrival, turns into what we would call fairy tale. In that everyday life cheese was an essential food and a valuable possession. As an essential, cheese is the principal ingredient in the *moretum* that an Italian peasant prepares for his midday meal – alongside the newly baked bread contributed by his wife – in the Latin poem *Moretum*. In Zola's *La Débâcle* the frequent description of meals that consist of nothing but bread and cheese transmits the message that during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 soldiers and others had nothing beyond the bare necessities of life.

Where food is more varied, cheese retains its place. There it is in one of the dinner invitations over which the readers of Roman poets salivated: 'eggs lightly fried, cheese smoked at a Velabran hearth, olives that have felt the frost of Picenum' are on offer to Martial's guests. The usual form, which Martial here abandons, is to claim that the produce comes from one's own estate; perhaps, even in first-century literary

'A Free Lunch': print by Currier & Ives, New York, 1872.

Rome, 'cheese from a good producer' had a better ring to it than 'cheese from the farm'. There is cheese, again, in the Greek *Idylls* of Theokritos, a gift by a shepherd to a lover, an offering on a rustic altar to one of the gods or goddesses of the countryside. Even then, this was nothing new. From the earliest records and in the earliest art cheese was an object suitable to be offered to the gods. In Hittite religion there was even a puzzling ritual in which men fought with cheeses, or rather, perhaps, fought one another with cheeses as weapons.[16] In Ben Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd*, cheese and milk products abound at an imagined country festival: 'Fall to your cheesecakes, curds, and clotted cream,/Your fools, your flans . . . strain ewe's milk/Into your cider syllabubs.'

Cheese may arouse disgust or fascination. The former, certainly, in the same playwright's *Bartholomew Fair*. A country constable is abused with the words: 'You are a Welsh cuckold, and no constable! You stink of leeks, metheglyn [mead] and cheese.' Indeed the Welsh liking for toasted cheese and 'Welsh rarebit' was so notorious in the sixteenth century that it was the subject of a popular English story retold by Andrew Boorde in *A Compendyous Regyment* (1542). There were once many Welshmen in heaven, but now there are none. This is because Saint Peter found a clever way to relieve the overcrowding: 'St Peter went outside of heven gayts and cryd with a loude voice, "Cause Babe! Cause Babe!" that is as moche as to say "Rostyd chese!" which thynge the Welchmen heryng ran out of heven . . . And St Peter went into heven and lokkyd the dore.' Other literary sources confirm the disgust that cheese can rather easily arouse. No reader of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* will forget the anecdote that demonstrates the 'advantages of cheese as a travelling companion'. The narrator has been entrusted by an unnamed friend with two fine, mature cheeses (Cheshire? Lancashire?)

Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), *The Parmesan Cheese Seller*.

to carry by rail from Liverpool to London. This aromatic cargo ensures that even on a crowded train he has always a compartment to himself: one temporary companion, an undertaker, observes that the smell 'puts him in mind of a dead baby', after which everyone else in the carriage tries to escape at the same moment. As if to provide advance support for this jaundiced view of cheese, Giulio Landi, who favoured the cheeses of Piacenza and Parma, had made unfavourable comparisons of provatura with an old man's testicle and caciocavallo with a sagging breast.

Yet cheese fascinates. In John Ford's 1633 comedy *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a young rake is said to love his mistress 'almost as well as he loves Parmesan'. It demands high praise. The Roquefort sniffed and praised by the French poet Saint-Amant in 1642 was 'one of the most refined'; his Cantal was worth its weight in gold. A 'perfect' Wensleydale stood on the sideboard at a dinner of spies in Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*. In Huysmans' *A rebours* ('Against Nature'), *un fromage bleu de Stilton dont la douceur s'imprégnait d'amertume*: 'a blue Stilton, its sweetness impregnated with bitterness', tasted at the English tavern beside the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris, was distinguished enough to substitute – in the mind of the sensation-hungry Des Esseintes – for a trip to London.

Both the negative and the positive are visible in two recent essays by Piero Camporesi in which he explores the early dieticians' suspicions of cheese, counterpointed by the growth of a gastronomic tradition in Renaissance Italy; but long before Camporesi the negatives and positives had been scented and catalogued in Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris*. This novel is set in and around Les Halles, the central food market of Paris, and the pages that conjure up a cheese shop with its strange shapes and overpowering aromas go well beyond realism (as, now and then, Zola did). On their straw mats are

little *bondons* placed end to end and Gournays set out like old coins blotched with verdigris. On the table is a giant Cantal, split as if by an axe, wrapped in chard leaves; a golden Cheshire; a Gruyère like a barbaric chariot wheel; Dutch cheeses like severed, blood-spattered heads and as brittle as empty skulls – *têtes-de-mort* indeed. There are three Bries, two of them perfect full moons, the third gibbous, its pale interior leaking from it copiously to form a lake of cream. There is a Port-Salut like an antique discus, and a Romantour wrapped in silver paper like a nougat bar;[17] there are goat's-milk cheeses the size of babies' fists, and above them all a princely Roquefort under a glass dome, its fatty surface marbled blue and yellow as if infected by some revolting disease. Still smellier cheeses follow: a Mont d'Or, pale yellow, with its sweetish whiff; a Troyes (perhaps what we know as Chaource) with the scent of damp caves; Camemberts like game that has hung too long; Neufchâtel, Limburger, Maroilles and Pont-l'Evêque

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Mont d'Or in preparation: cheese dairy at Longevilles-Mont-d'Or, France.

are all listed in turn, and Livarot like a waft of sulphur in the throat; and then the Olivets wrapped in their walnut leaves (as Zola insists they are), stinking like carrion left to rot at the edge of a field, steaming in the sun. At the back of the shop a Géromé, anise-flavoured, in its thin wooden box, gives off such a poisonous odour that the flies have fallen dead around it.

Conclusion

These are mere shavings from the monk's head. The brief history of cheese is that of its invention, which remains obscure; the full, true history of cheese, and of cheeses, is an unwritten page. The frustrations for the cheese historian are that in the past so little was recorded of the infinite variety of skill and care devoted to great cheeses; and that between the documents, the places, the names and the flavours, so

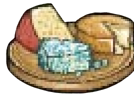
White Wensleydale (and not the older blue) is now the classic type, even favoured by Wallace and Gromit.

much is intangible and so many changes, good and bad, pass unnoticed. Was it right, above, to conclude that mid-nineteenth-century Stilton was usually not blue? Will it be right, after reading Burdett's assertion that Wensleydale 'should be creamy, rich, subtle in flavour, and be soft enough to spread, and its blue should branch uniformly over its surface' to dismiss white Wensleydale as a mere impostor?

All too little has been said here of microbiological and nutritional studies of cheese; many that ought to be useful (to historians as well as nutritionists) are flawed because they fail to specify how the cheese was sourced. Well-aged farmhouse Cheddar and Gruyère, and traditionally made buffalo's-milk mozzarella, differ strongly in lactose, fat and salt content and in their microbiological fauna from the commoner imitations; cheese scientists, not, perhaps, being cheese-lovers, seem hardly to have noticed such differences. They have at any rate scarcely begun to explore them.

Should a history such as this mention the Biggest Cheeses in the World?[18] Disappeared as soon as made, they are mere pimples on the face of cheese history. Perhaps it was unfair to pass over with scarcely a mention the current revival of small-scale artisanal cheese-making in France, the United States and Britain; but there are other books about this, and in the context of a five-thousand-year history we hardly know, for a century yet, whether this particular episode will be a turning point. It may be the last, expiring breath of real cheese, soon to be stifled for ever by global trade, industrial production and the deadly ignorance of those who decree our health; or it may be an early sign of an approaching new order of things, when pure logic will have driven from our midst all those who eat aseptically, and real cheese will rule the world. Even a dispassionate historian may be permitted this momentary vision of a better future.

Recipes



Stewed Kid

—Yale Babylonian Tablets, no. 4644 (translation from J. Bottéro, 'The Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia' in *Biblical Archaeologist*, 1985). *Samīdu* and *šuhutinnū* are unidentified

Head, legs and tail should be singed [before being put in the pot]. Take the meat. Bring water to a boil. Add fat. Onions, *samīdu*, leeks, garlic, some blood, some fresh cheese, the whole beaten together. Add an equal amount of plain *šuhutinnū*.

Grilled Gurnard

—Dorion quoted by Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai*

Gurnards should be split along the spine, grilled, and seasoned with fresh herbs, cheese, silphium, salt and olive oil. Then they should be turned, more oil added, salt sprinkled on; and finally taken off the fire and soused in vinegar.

Junket à l'ancienne

—Paxamos quoted in the *Geoponika*

Melke (a version of junket) is easy to make and especially good if you pour sharp vinegar into new earthenware pots and put them

on hot ashes or a slow fire, i.e. charcoal; when the vinegar begins to simmer take them off the fire before it boils away; then pour milk into the same pots and put them away in a cupboard or chest where they will not be disturbed. Next day you will have *melkai* much better than those made in the more troublesome way. After one or two uses, change the pots.

Myma

—Epainetos quoted by Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai*. *Geteion* is a variety of onion, perhaps something similar to a shallot. In this ancient Greek recipe 'sacrificial meat' means lamb, kid, pork or beef

A *myma* of any sacrificial meat, or chicken, is to be made by chopping the lean meat finely, mincing liver and offal with blood, and flavouring with vinegar, melted cheese, silphium, cumin, thyme leaf, thyme seed, Roman hyssop, coriander leaf, coriander seed, *geteion*, peeled fried onion (or poppy seed), raisins (or honey) and the seeds of a sour pomegranate.

A Ploughman's Lunch

—*Moretum*. The poem, often attributed to Virgil, depicts a peasant preparing his midday meal, a fiery cheese-and-garlic mix to be eaten with bread

First, lightly digging into the ground with his fingers, he pulls up four heads of garlic with their fleshy leaves; then he picks slim celery-tops and sturdy rue and the thin stems of trembling coriander. With these collected he sits before the fire and sends the slave-girl for a mortar. He splashes a grass-grown bulb with water, and puts it to the hollow mortar. He seasons with grains of salt, and, after the salt, hard cheese is added; then he mixes in the herbs. With the pestle, his right hand works at the fiery garlic, then he crushes all alike in a mixture. His hand circles. Gradually the ingredients lose their individuality; out of the many colours emerges one – neither wholly green (for the white tempers it), nor shining white (since tinted by so many herbs). The work goes

on: not jerkily, as before, but more heavily the pestle makes its slow circuits. So he sprinkles in some drops of Athena's olive oil, and adds a little sharp vinegar, and again works his mixture together. Then at length he runs two fingers round the mortar, gathering the whole mixture into a ball, so as to produce the form and name of a finished *moretum*. Meanwhile busy Scybale has baked a loaf . . .

A Digestive

—from Columella, *On Agriculture*. Other sources explain that silphium, the ancient North African spice, was already unobtainable by Columella's time: asafoetida was therefore being used as a substitute. In spite of his advice, it is best to go easy on the asafoetida

Oxyporon: pepper, white if any, if not black, 3 oz.; celery seed 2 oz.; *laser* root, which Greeks call *silphium*, 1.5 oz.; cheese 1 sextans [2 oz.]: crush and sift them, mix with honey, keep in a new jar. When called for, mix just the quantity required with vinegar and *garum*. If you have asafoetida instead of silphium, better to increase by half an ounce.

Conserved Cheese

—from Columella, *On Agriculture*. The 'pitching' of the pot is unnecessary if an airtight jar is used; a little pine resin would substitute for the flavour

We will conserve cheese as follows. Cut large pieces of hard sheep's milk cheese one year old and arrange them in a pitched earthenware pot, then fill with must of best quality so that the cheese is covered and there is rather more juice than cheese (because the cheese absorbs it, and will spoil if not fully covered). As soon as you have filled the jar, seal it with gypsum. After twenty days you can open and use it, with whatever seasoning you like, though it is not unpleasant by itself.

Sala Cattabia

—from *Apicius*. This is one of three recipes for *sala cattabia* in *Apicius*. Vestine was a young sheep's- or goat's-milk cheese produced not far from Rome

Put in a mortar celery seed, dried pennyroyal, dried mint, ginger, coriander leaf, seeded raisins, honey, vinegar, oil and wine. Crush. Put in a pan bits of Picentine bread and mix with chicken meat, kid's sweetbreads, Vestine cheese, pine kernels, cucumbers, dried onions chopped fine. Pour the liquid over. At the last moment scatter snow on top and serve.

Cheese 'Slices'

—Yale MS Beinecke 163, no. 135 (*An Ordinance of Pottage*, ed. Constance B. Hieatt, 1988). Hieatt suggests 6 oz semi-soft cheese, 2 oz butter, 2 tbsp clear honey, 8 egg yolks; bake, she advises, in a medium oven for about 25 minutes

Leche fryed: take soft cheese; cut it into pieces and melt it in scalding hot water: as soon as it melts and runs, pour off the water as neatly as you can. Add plenty of melted, clarified butter, and clarified honey, and mix it well together with yolks of egg. Make pastry shells, as thin as you can, with low sides; pour in the mixture so that the bottom is covered, bake them gently, and serve.

'Viking Pies'

—from *Le viandier de Taillevent*, (ed. Scully, 1988). No instructions are given for the pie-cases or for the cooking: possibly, as Scully suggests, the mixture was to be sealed in small pastries and deep-fried

Pastez nourroys: take finely-chopped, well-cooked meat, pine-nut paste, currants, finely crumbled rich cheese, a little sugar and very little salt.

Recocta (ricotta)

—from Platina, *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*. Another authority suggests eating ricotta with a little rosewater (Bartolomeo Boldo, *Libro della natura delle cose che nutriscono*, 1576)

We heat the whey left from the cheese in a cauldron over a slow fire until all the fat has risen to the top; this is what country people call recocta, because it is made from left-over milk heated up. It is very white and mild. It is less healthy than new or medium-aged cheese, but it is thought better than aged or excessively salty cheese. Whether one likes to call it cocta or recocta, cooks use it in many recipes, especially those based on green vegetables.

Cheese-cakes

—from *The Closet of Sir Kenelm Digby Opened* (1648 edn). What shape should the 'coffins' be? They ought to look like a bishop's hat, according to the satirical *Marprelate Epistles*

Take twelve quarts of Milk warm from the Cow, turn it with a good spoonful of Runnet. Break it well, and put it into a large strainer, in which rowl it up and down, that all the Whey may run out into a little tub; when all that will is run out, wring out more. Then break the curds well; then wring it again, and more whey will come. Thus break and wring till no more come. Then work the Curds exceedingly with your hand in a tray, till they become a short uniform Paste. Then put to it the yolks of eight new laid Eggs, and two whites, and a pound of butter. Work all this long together . . . Then season them to your taste with Sugar finely beaten; and put in some Cloves and Mace in subtile powder. Then lay them thick in Coffins of fine Paste, and bake them.

Potted Cheshire Cheese

—from Hannah Glasse, *Art of Cookery*, 1747 edn. Oloroso sherry will substitute for rich Canary wine

Take three pounds of Cheshire-cheese, and put it into a mortar, with half a pound of the best fresh butter you can get, pound them together, and in the beating, add a gill of rich Canary-wine, and half an ounce of mace finely beat, then sifted fine like a fine powder. When all is extremely well mixed, press it hard down into a gallipot, cover it with clarified butter, and keep it cool. A slice of this exceeds all the cream-cheese that can be made.

Welsh Rarebit

—from Hannah Glasse, *Art of Cookery*, 1747 edn. Glasse adds variants, *Scotch-Rabbit* and *English-Rabbit*

To make a Welch-Rabbit. Toast the bread on both sides, then toast the cheese on one side, and lay it on the toast, and with a hot iron brown the other side. You may rub it over with mustard.

Liptauer

—from Maria Kaneva-Johnson, *The Melting Pot: Balkan Food and Cookery*, 1995

150g lightly drained quark or fresh, unsalted white cheese; 75g unsalted butter, at room temperature; 1 teaspoon finely grated onion; 2 hard-boiled eggs, peeled and halved; 1 teaspoon prepared mustard; ½ teaspoon finely ground or pounded caraway seed; ½ teaspoon paprika; ½ teaspoon salt; a good grinding of pepper (preferably white). Combine all the ingredients and either whizz to a smooth cream in a food processor, or force through a sieve. Serve chilled, with wholewheat or rye bread.

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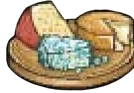

1 The Cheeseboard

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2 C. Campbell, *The Traveller's Complete Guide through Belgium and Holland*, 2nd edn (1817), vol. 4, p. 92.
3 Here and elsewhere, quotations of Daniel Defoe are from his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–7).
4 A. V. Kirwan, *Host and Guest* (London, 1864).
5 'Doctor Thebussem' writing in *La ilustracion española y americana* (1882), p. 334.
6 Master Chiquart, *Du fait de cuisine* (1420). See Terence Scully, trans., *Chiquart's 'On Cookery'* (New York, 1986).
7 In Thomas Muffett, *Health's Improvement*. The widespread claim that Cheshire cheese is mentioned in the Domesday Book is nonsense.
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9 Aristotle, *History of Animals* (about 330 BC). Quotations from 521b27–522a31; 522b3–5.

10 Homer, *Iliad* (seventh century BC). Quotations from 11.624–41; 5.902–03.
11 Alkman (fragment 34 Page) quoted by Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai*, 498ff.
12 Pietro Casola, *Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*. Quotation via Margaret Newett's translation (Manchester, 1907).
13 Not recorded in this sense, but reconstructed from the diminutive *formula* 'small cheese' (Palladius, *Agriculture*, 5.9.2).
14 Mícheál Ó Sé, 'Old Irish Cheeses and Other Milk Products' in *Journal of the Cork Historical & Archaeological Society*, 2nd ser., vol. 53 (1948), pp. 82–7.

3 Making

1 Pierre Boisard, *Camembert: A National Myth* (Berkeley, 2003), p. 27, citing Thomas Corneille, *Dictionnaire universel géographique* (1708) and Charles Jobey, *Histoire d'Orbec* (1778), p. 632; the latter reports 'Augelot' cheeses on sale, more correctly Angelot, that were 'not as large, nor as good, nor as rich as Livarot or Camembert cheese'. Admittedly the work by Jobey does not exist as Boisard cites it. I believe that this is not a new myth created by Boisard (so skilled at demolishing other myths) but a faulty citation of a real manuscript of the late eighteenth century.
2 On 23 April, according to a list in *Geoponika*, 1.9.
3 I translate *agrestis carduus* as 'cardoon'; other translations are possible. Several of the speculative and unreliable items in modern lists of vegetable rennets go back to these two phrases in Columella's text.
4 'Nesh' (soft) is a now-forgotten word once familiar in rural England.
5 For example, W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*, vol. I (London, 1947), p. 357.
6 John Gerard, *Herball* (London, 1597), pp. 1126–8.

7 Diane Kochilas, *The Glorious Foods of Greece* (New York, 2001), p. 394.
8 As reported by Franco Rodano, quoted at www.katciu-martel.it/pensiero_debole.htm. The quotation is sometimes attributed to others – and some Italians insist that the correct plural is *cacicavalli*!
9 In his *La miniera del mondo* (Milan, 1990), p. 99.
10 This text was well known to le Grand d'Aussy in the eighteenth century. Recently the partisans of Brie have argued that the Latin word *aerugo*, which I translate as 'mould', really means 'rind', and that this anecdote is all about Brie. Notker's English translator, Lewis Thorpe, accepted (surprisingly) that *aerugo* means 'rind'; so does Heather Jones, whose online discussion of this anecdote is at www.heatherrosejones.com/simplearticles/charlemagnes-cheese.html. They are wrong for three reasons. First, the Latin word does not normally have that meaning. Second, no one argues that the rind is the best part of a cheese. Third, if rind was the issue, why did the bishop need to cut the cheeses in half?
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14 Osbert Burdett, *A Little Book of Cheese* (London, 1935), p. 93.

4 Consuming

1 The following quotations are from early, lost texts cited in Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai*, 403e, 321c, 324a, 646b. Kronos was the king of the Greek gods until overthrown by Zeus.
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7 Xenophanes quoted by Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai*, 462c.
8 François Rabelais, *Le quart livre*, Chapter 9.
9 Somewhat older in France, the cheeseboard is discussed as a fairly new idea for Britain in T. A. Layton, *Choose Your Cheese* (London, 1957), p. 35.
10 *Historia Augusta*, 'Antoninus Pius', 12.8.
11 See Knirim's obituary, *New York Times* (15 October 1927), and the memoir in Frederick L. Hackenberg, *A Solitary Parade* (New York, 1929).
12 Fully explored in Pierre Boisard, *Camembert: A National Myth* (Berkeley, 2003). For the unveiling see www.vimoutiers.net/vimus/img/1926/lilctw.gif.
13 Printed by Rufus W. Griswold at Vergennes, VT.
14 Plenty of attention is given to bad cheese in Frederick Accum's *Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons* (London, 1820).
15 John Frith, *Antithesis of Christ's Acts* (1529); John Wilkins, *Discovery of a New World* (1638); compare John Heywood, *Proverbs* (1546).
16 Harry A. Hoffner, 'Milch(produkte)' in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 8, ed. Erich Ebeling, Bruno Meissner et al. (1978), pp. 189–205.
17 The obscure relatives of this literary cheese are Romadur, now made in Germany, Remedou ascribed to Belgium, and perhaps Remoudou (but this in turn is said to be another name for Herve: see Roland Barthélémy and Arnaud Sperat-Czar, *Cheeses of the World:A Season-by-Season Guide to Buying, Storing and Serving* (London, 2004), pp. 140, 202).
18 Made between 1801 and 1937, and imprecisely listed in T. A. Layton, *Choose Your Cheese* (London, 1957), pp. 17–21.

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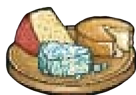

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Websites and Associations

Much can be found on the web, from pictures of all imaginable cheeses to the text of the legislation that attempts to constrain them. All the better-known individual cheeses have producers' associations, and a growing number of retailers sell cheese online; search engines will find these sites easily so they are not listed here.

Blogs

'Fromage du mois', a cheese-of-the-month blog,
US-based in spite of its name
www.fromagedumois.org

'Tout un fromage' – and this one really *is* in French
www.tout1fromage.canalblog.com

Cheese-making and Cheese Science

University of Guelph, Food Science
and Technology, 'Cheese site'
www.foodsci.uoguelph.ca/cheese

David B. Fankhauser, 'Beginning cheese making'
www.biology.clc.uc.edu/fankhauser/Cheese/
Cheese_course/Cheese_course.htm

Online Cheese Catalogues and Encyclopaedias

Cheese.com lists 670 cheeses
www.cheese.com

'Join us in France' lists 500 French cheeses
www.joinusinfrance.net/html/cheeses.html

Formaggio.it, in Italian and English, discusses
Italian cheese in particular
www.formaggio.it

Wikipedia is not recommended. Though good
on some related topics, it is poor on cheeses
and generally unreliable on food history
www.en.wikipedia.org

Trade

'Cheese market news', United States
www.cheesemarketnews.com

'Cheese reporter', United States
www.cheesereporter.com

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www.cerefia.univ-rennes1.fr/cerefia/Dossiers/Sect/lait

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www.wisdairy.com/AllAboutCheese

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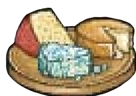

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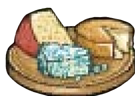

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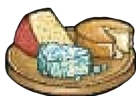

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